They don't understand me!
Tales from the multi-cultural trenches

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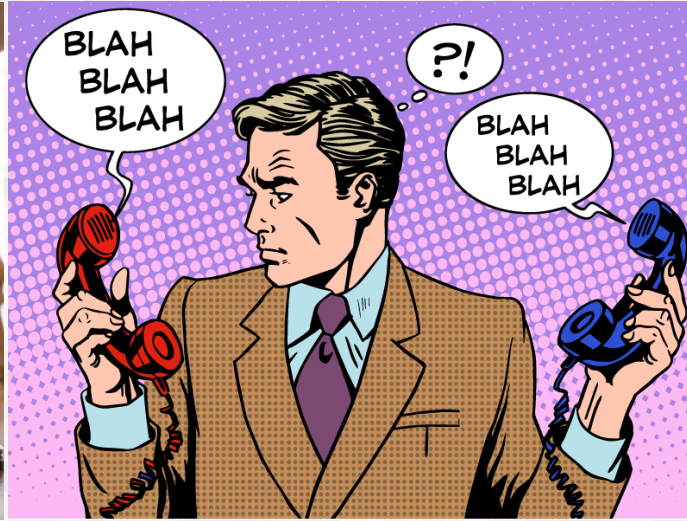slides revision 2018-06-11

20
18

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#AdobeRemix
Lauro Samblas
Unless noted otherwise, all images are from Adobe Stock

Cultural diversity is a great asset in our communities.
But it makes communication harder.
Especially on low-bandwidth channels.

Typical Failure Scenario
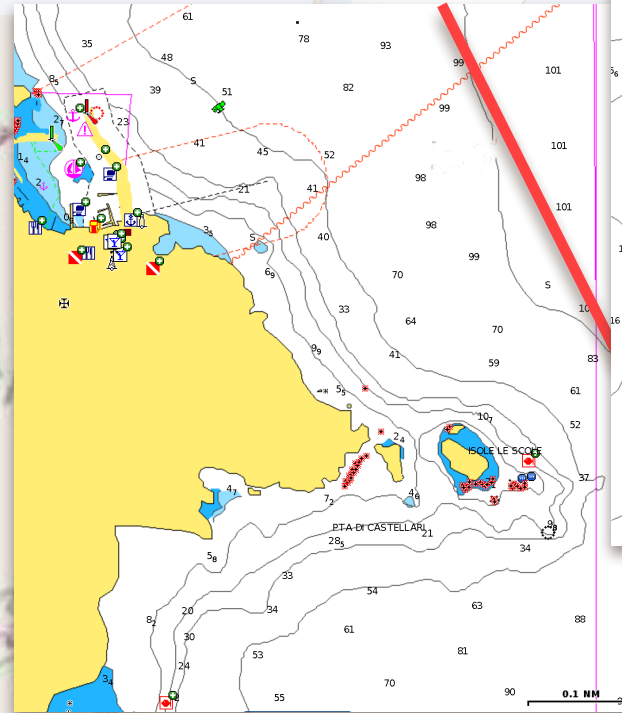
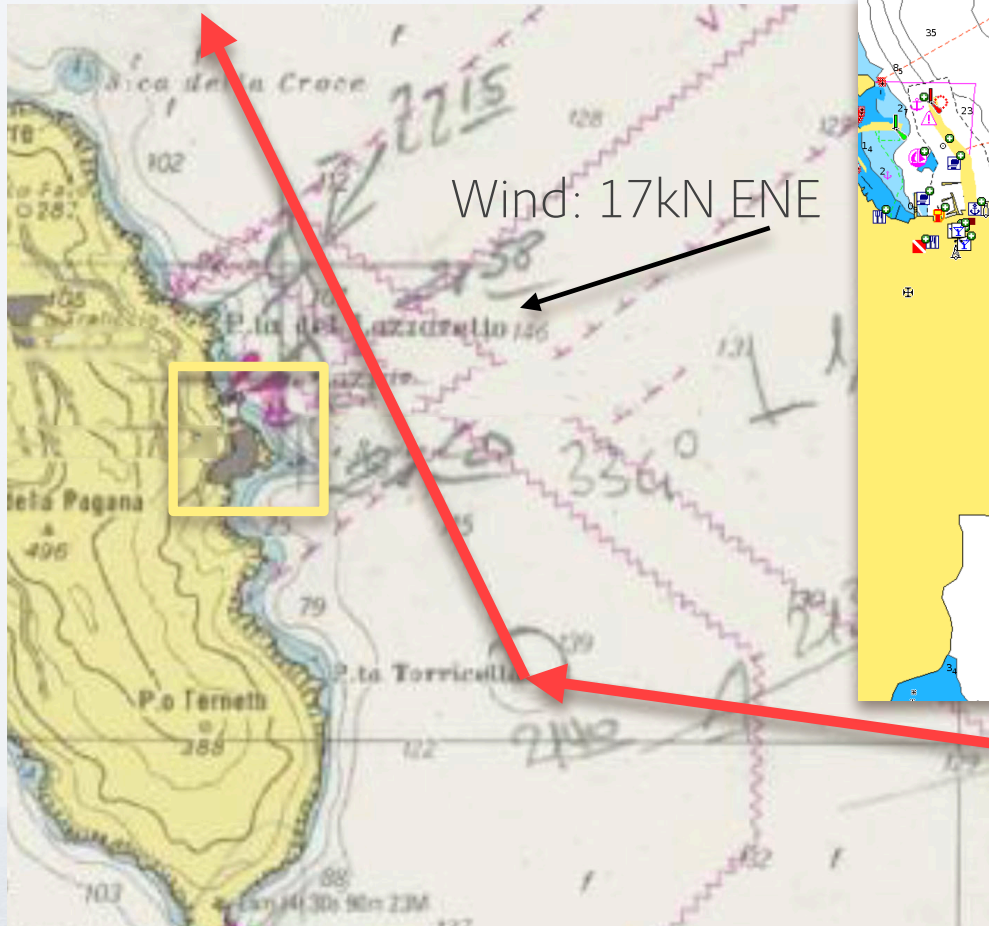

bad decision

misunderstandings,
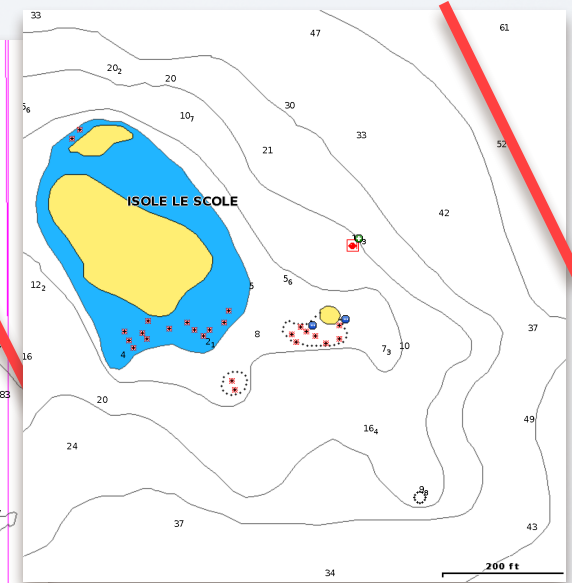no course correction

DISASTER

THE
APACHE ®
SOFTWARE FOUNDATION

There would be many examples from the ASF, but after digging in
I found a few interesting ones from other fields…

20
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Bad decisions that might lead to disasters…
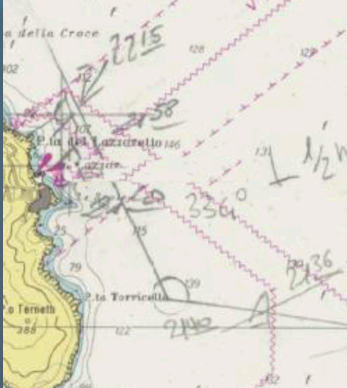
Wind: 17kN ENE

zoom in…

zoom in more…

Sailing too close to the rocks?

But you have crew, right? "many eyeballs"

WDYT?

Bad decisions -> bad communication -> disaster

4.6.1.2 Language of work on board

To establish a language of work on board of a ship, which can be understood by personnel of 38 different nationalities who caters for passengers belonging to 26 countries, as in our case, is fundamental to consent communication necessary for the efficient running of the ship and above all, to assure that the expected procedures in case of emergency work.

Costa Crociere has chosen the Italian as language of work on board her ships.
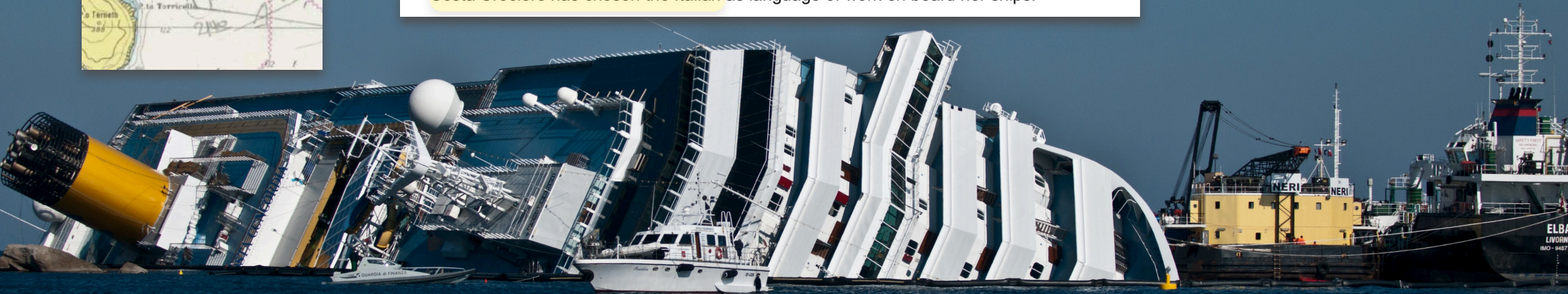
The 1st Engineer. assigned to manage all the engine equipments (interview on 20 March 2012 – Enc. 384), of Bulgarian nationality, testified he does not fully understand the orders given in the Italian language (the work language), during the emergencies situations.

The helmsman on duty, testified with the support of an interpreter, (see paper n. 0267 of the Judicial Authority of Grosseto), that he did not at times understand the Master's orders despite they were in English.

At 21 39 30 with **speed 3.15** Master orders the helmsman to go for 300 , and at 21 40 00 orders to **increase to 16 knots** and then to pull "gently" to 310 °.

At 21:40:48 the Master orders, in English, *".. 325 .."* the helmsman answers, to confirm the order *".. 315 ..",* the First Deck Officer intervenes to correct the interpretation of the helmsman but pronounces *".. 335 .."* then the Master reiterates its order *".. 325 .."* and then the Helmsman confirms *".. 325 ..".*

source: MINISTRY OF INFRASTRUCTURES AND TRANSPORTS
Marine Casualties Investigative Body
Cruise Ship
COSTA CONCORDIA
Marine casualty on January 13, 2012
Report on the safety technical investigation

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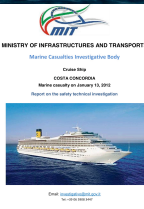
The Curse of the Tower of Babel…

cheek kiss? how many?

"there is a zebra crossing around the corner"

shake hands?
look people in the eye?
physical contact?

how do you cheer?
drink alcohol, when, where?

gestures…

Colm MacCárthaigh
@colmmacc

In Ireland it's a totally normal, ok, and even consoling remark to ask "Was it a good funeral?". There's a lot in that phrase. Really doesn't work in the US though.

in the UK,
this is a rubber..

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Jokes might not work…

What's the difference between a duck?
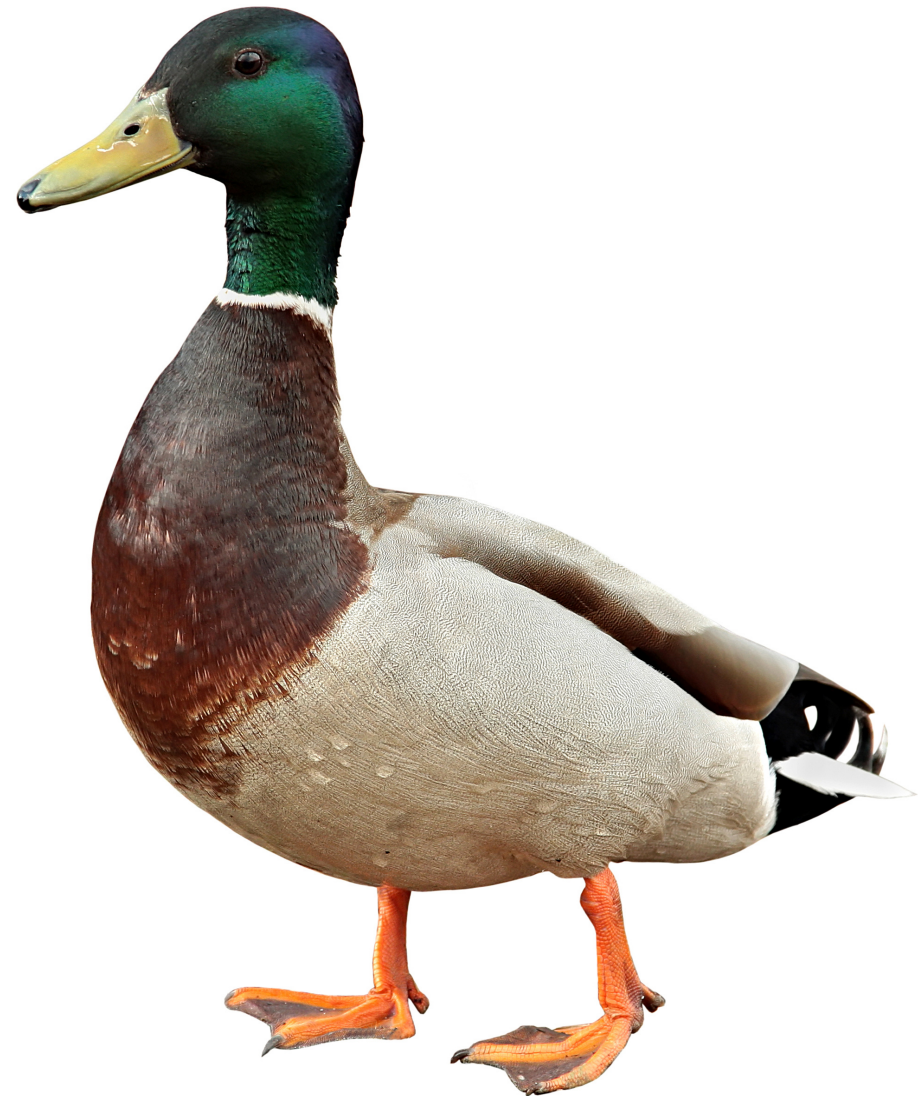
Expressing agreement or disagreement...

↻ Mark Struberg a retweeté

Tom Wallis
@tsawallis

Academic criticism:

German: "This study is deeply flawed because of X."

Brit: "Pardon my skepticism, but could it be that X is a bit of a problem here?"

American: "This study blew my mind – AMAZING!! Minor point: have you considered the relevance of X to your conclusion?"

Are you an adult?
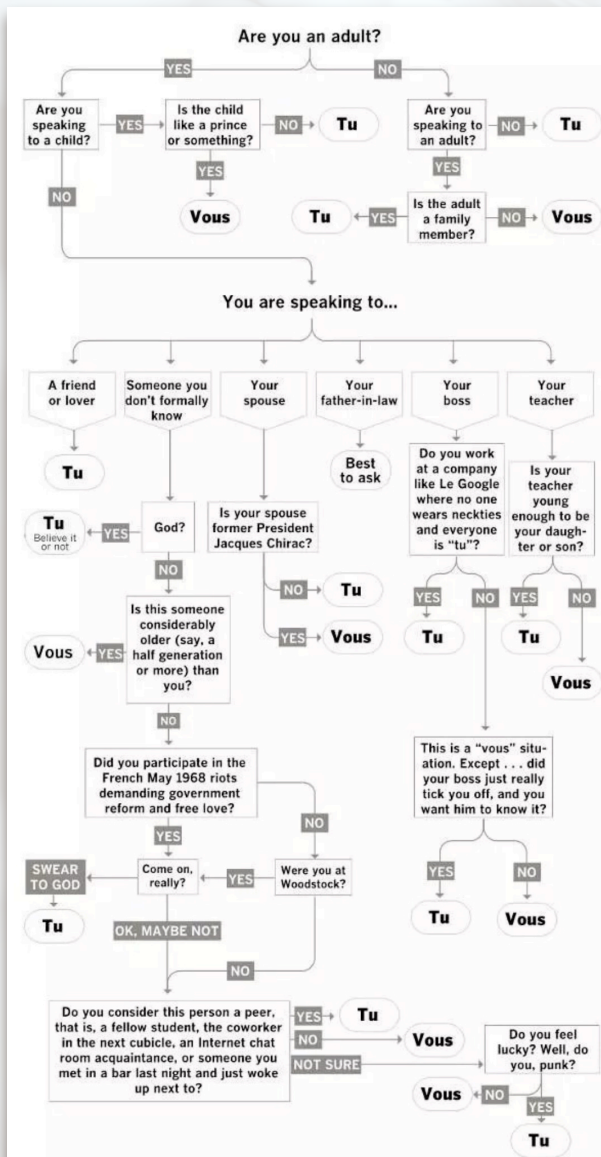
David Auerbach ✔
@AuerbachKeller

Suivre

Tu vs. Vous in French. via Alliance Francaise Sydney.

also a good illustration of why natural language is so hard for computers (and humans)

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Puzzled (or horrified) faces can help steer face-to-face conversations the right way.

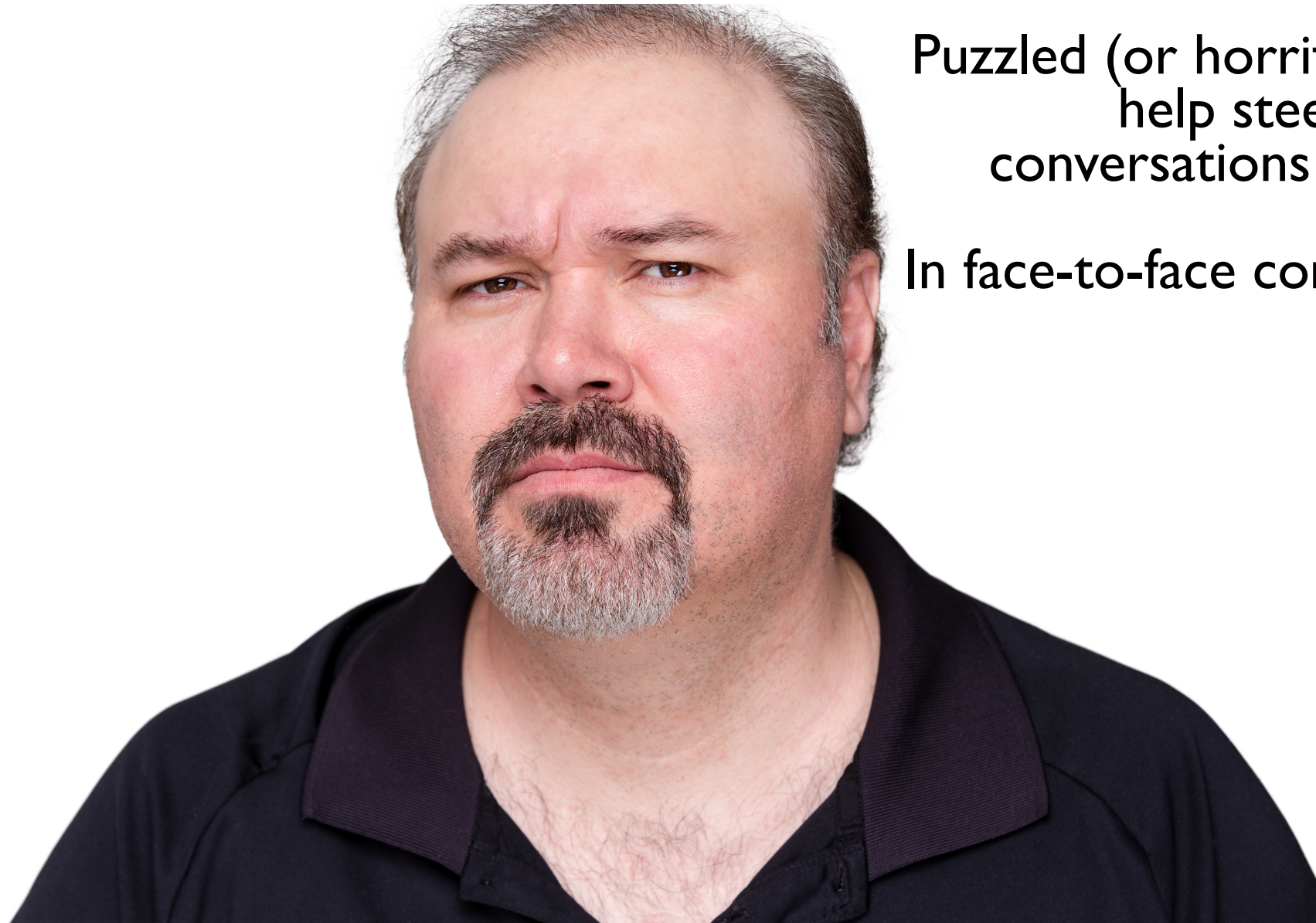In face-to-face communications, that is...

20
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it's
COMPLICATED

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"Culture" hides in unexpected places

Report to the President

By the

PRESIDENTIAL COMMISSION

On the Space Shuttle Challenger Accident

June 6th, 1986
Washington, D.C.

Representation and Misrepresentation: Tufte and the Morton Thiokol Engineers on the *Challenger* *
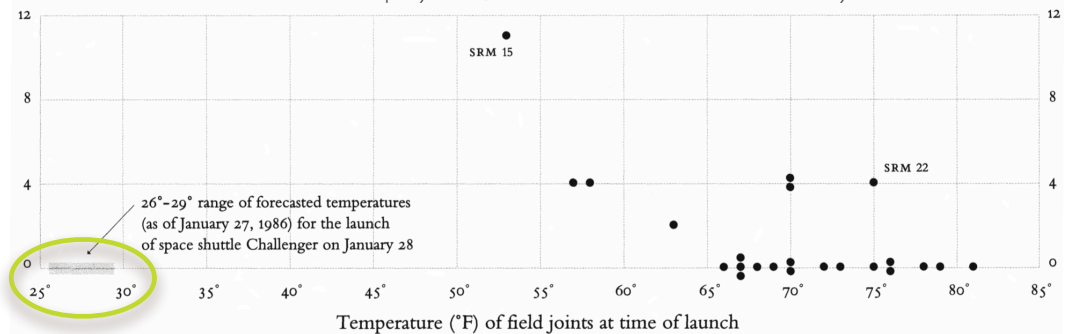
Wade Robison, Roger Boisjoly, David Hoeker, Stefan Young

Fourth, they succeeded in convincing their managers originally—if only because they had a collective sense that a launch should not occur and were, after all, the best positioned to make such a judgment. The managers overturned that recommendation when NASA refused to accept it and changed the burden of proof by asking for evidence that *Challenger* was not flight-ready. By shifting the burden of proof, NASA shifted from a risk-averse decision procedure to a decision procedure congenial to high fliers, willing to risk catastrophe unless it could be shown it would in fact occur.

Edward Tufte's (later) diagram, from his book
The Visual Display of Quantitative Information - heavily recommended!

O-ring damage index, each launch

26°–29° range of forecasted temperatures (as of January 27, 1986) for the launch of space shuttle Challenger on January 28

Temperature (°F) of field joints at time of launch

Joint Primary Concerns   SRM 25

- A Temperature Lower Than Current Data Base Results in Changing Primary O-Ring Sealing Timing Function
- SRM 15A—80° ARC Black Grease Between O-Rings
  SRM 15B—110° ARC Black Grease Between O-Rings
- Lower O-Ring squeeze due to lower temp.
- Higher O-Ring shore hardness
- Thicker grease viscosity
- Higher O-Ring pressure actuation time
- If actuation time increases, threshold of secondary seal pressurization capability is approached
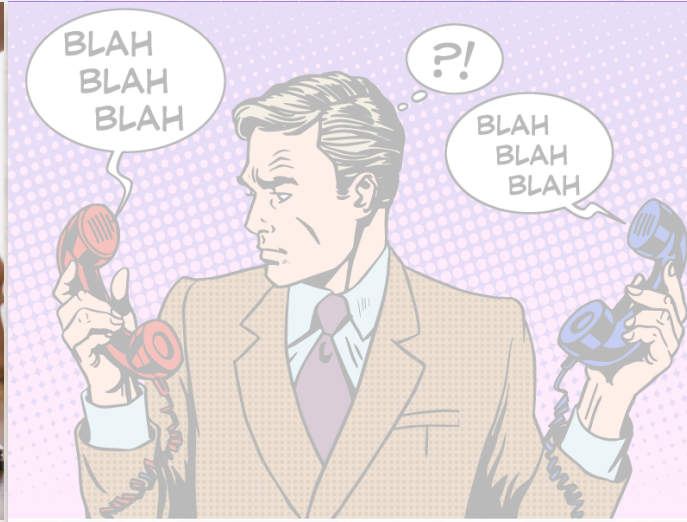
engineering vs. management culture...
speak a language that your correspondents understand!

typical engineering report,
from the Report to the President

20
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it's
COMPLICATED
how do we fix it?

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Typical Failure Scenario

bad decision

Fix THIS!

misunderstandings,
no course correction

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Use simple language, well-known idioms

Example of English adapted to Simplified Technical English (STE)

Text in standard English	>	Text in Simplified Technical English
Follow the safety instructions when working on the valves.		*Obey the safety instructions when you turn the valves.*
All valves must be turned slowly in order to prevent strong steam jets which can damage both hose lines and components.		*Turn all valves slowly to prevent strong jets of steam.*
All valves must be closed manually.		*Steam can damage hose lines and components.*
Standing close to the valves when the system is under pressure is not recommended.		*Close all valves by hand.*
		Do not stay near the valves, if the system is pressurized.

Example from https://robertobertuol.com/simplified-technical-english/

We might not need *that* much, but keep it in mind!
People might not understand your subtle idioms or elaborate rhetoric…
Active voice, present tense, short phrases, concise messages!

ASD-STE100

ASD SIMPLIFIED TECHNICAL ENGLISH
SPECIFICATION ASD-STE100
EUROPEAN COMMUNITY TRADE MARK NO.
004901195
INTERNATIONAL SPECIFICATION FOR THE
PREPARATION OF TECHNICAL DOCUMENTATION
IN A CONTROLLED LANGUAGE

ISSUE 7 - JANUARY 2017
http://www.asd-ste100.org/

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Avoid misunderstandings!

Assume
Good Intentions

Ask for
Clarification

Reformulate

Graphics and signs, where possible, promote clarity

SENIORS AT PLAY

This one is just "decorated text", doesn't really help…

Code speaks louder than words!

Don't talk too much…

Show them the code!
(prototype, unfinished, ugly, doesn't matter!)

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Be explicit with jokes, irony…

I am going to tell you a joke about ducks. Well, it's not even really about ducks and it's really local, so I'm not sure if you'll even consider it a joke…

Full political correctness can be boring, it's a balance to find, over time!

20
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Phrasing things in a friendly, constructive way...

I'm freaking out (in a friendly way ;-) when I see comments that imply that we might be "married" to such proprietary services. Can you reassure me that this is not the case, or can we work together to see if we can avoid that?

I'm not sure what you mean by "substandard" in this context, could you clarify? Do you mean that you would like us to get rid of that code"? I might not have understood properly.

Calling code that I wrote a "piece of sh*t" makes me uncomfortable. I'm not saying my code is perfect, but if we can use more constructive statements, especially as to how I can improve my work (even if that means starting over) I think that would help us move forward, for the sake of the project.
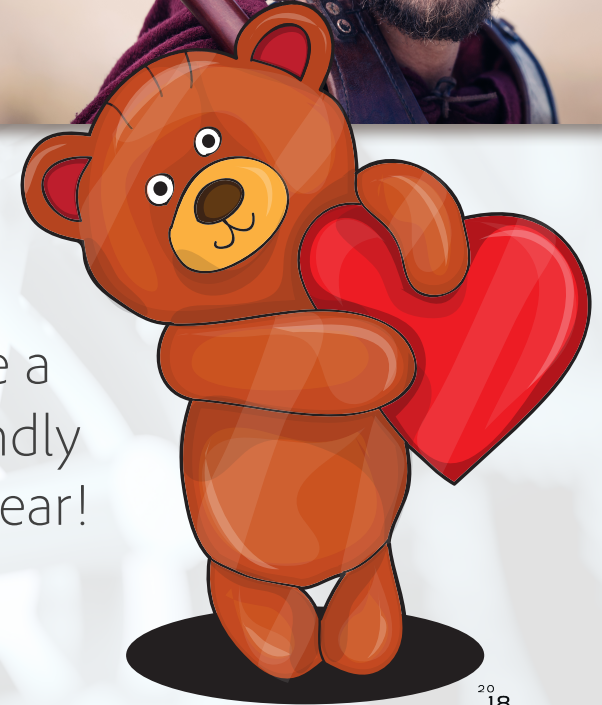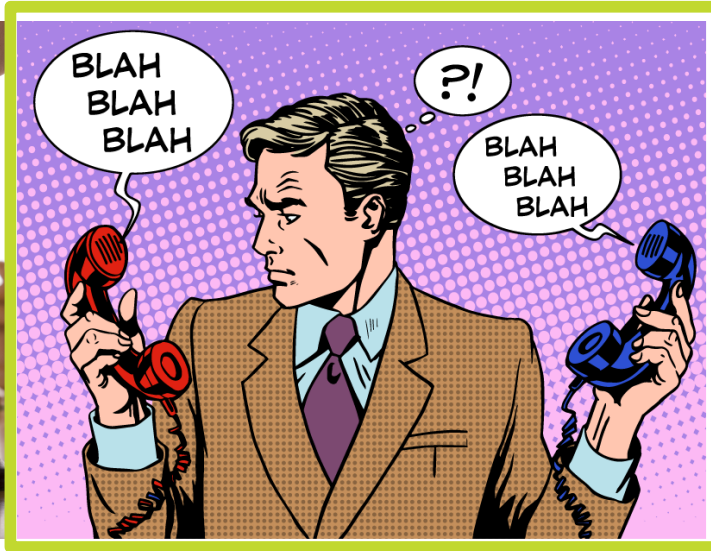
Focused like a warrior, friendly like a care bear!

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Be direct. Respectful. Concise. Friendly.

You WANT that
course correction!

CODA

Wind: 17kN ENE

We all make bad decisions from time to time...
Course correction makes the difference!

It requires good communications, where you verify that there are
no misunderstandings and **no hidden cultural obstacles**.

Don't be afraid to ask and double-check!

I'm @bdelacretaz,
thanks!

20
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