

THE "IS" OF IDENTITY IN BUSINESS SITUATIONS

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IN THE COURSE of a single week a business man faces a surprising variety of problems. Problems which do not involve human relations are usually quite simple. Nearly all of them can be solved by simple, well-known, technical procedures — or by factual knowledge easily obtainable. Unfortunately, an executive confronts relatively few problems of this type. By far the more numerous are those which involve people.

A modern industrial enterprise requires a high order of voluntary cooperative behavior on the part of great masses of people. American Telegraph and Telephone has 600,000 employees, General Motors has 400,000, and U.S. Steel 300,000. Obviously, then, employees of great business concerns not only work on and with *things* but they work through and with other *people*. You often hear business men say that they have no difficulty obtaining accountants, engineers, mathematicians, mechanics, or brick masons, but that they have to train and develop their foremen, leaders, and executives. Our educational institutions must be doing a better job in supplying us with people who have adequate skills in dealing with things than they are in furnishing us leaders able to work with people. Here are a couple of semantically significant instances.

THE FIRST scene is a business conference, the purpose of which is to determine policy with respect to a threat to strike for higher wages by 4,000 employees of a baking company. The following conversation took place between a labor consultant called in by the company for help in the crisis and the manager of the threatened baking plant:

MANAGER: We know our wage structure is fair. I don't think we should budge an inch!

CONSULTANT: How do you know?

MANAGER: We have compared it with that of all major employers in our area.

CONSULTANT: How did you go about comparing it with the XYZ Steel Company, for example?

MANAGER: We compared like jobs, of course.

CONSULTANT: Well, the job of a foreman in the baking department is quite different from that of a foreman in an open hearth, isn't it?

MANAGER: Well, they aren't too far apart. They're both foremen. But we *know* our wage structure is as high as theirs.

CONSULTANT: What jobs are the same?

MANAGER: Common labor is certainly the same in both plants.

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CONSULTANT: Well, even pushing a wheelbarrow in a baking plant is not *exactly* the same as pushing one in a steel mill, is it?

MANAGER: (cornered and knowing it, but being completely unwilling or unable to admit it, sets his jaw) Common labor is common labor.

The scene might be funny if it weren't so serious. A lot was at stake and a central issue was being discussed. The manager appeared unconscious of the fact that the *words* "jobs" or "common labor" are something different from the actual, *non-verbal* performances of the workers. Since the words were the same, he seemed to assume that the jobs were the same. He acted as if the classification terms which we apply to these human functions told all about the functions. His error did not arise because of any lack of education; in fact, *the plant manager had several degrees and these in a scientific area*. Rather, I suggest that it arose because of the kind of education he had.

Suppose that, instead of the foregoing, his attitude had been, "Let's look at the operations first, *then* label them." Suppose he had remembered that the label won't tell all about the life-fact and that, since no two things in the world are identical, wheelbarrow-pusher₁ is not identical with wheelbarrow-pusher₂.

If his attitude had been, "How similar are the jobs?" — that is, a question of degree instead of kind, I submit that tempers would not have flared, time would have been saved and, more important, the best possible solution to the problem would have been brought nearer. I submit, further, that this attitude could have been brought about by an education *only a little different* from the one he had.

I know of some serious conversations over whether black and white *are* colors; over whether thumbs *are* fingers; over whether Senator X *is* a statesman or a politician. I know of a very earnest argument in which one expert stoutly defended the position that red *is* a color, a second expert just as stoutly maintained that it *is* a pastel, another that it *is* a shade, and still another that it *is* a tint. What *is* it really? The men engaging in these metaphysical disputations regarded themselves, of course, as practical business men and technicians!

IN THE FIELD of accounting, cash outlays are classified in such a way that some are charged to expense when incurred, for example, wages; others are charged into expenses gradually as the item wears out, for example, a machine or a building. In business shorthand we say that the former item is "expensed" and that the latter is "capitalized." With this in mind you will be in a better position to understand the following scene.

VISITOR: What's the matter with you this morning?

DIVISIONAL ACCOUNTANT: (obviously greatly disturbed) I received the most goddamn arbitrary letter this morning of my entire life.

VISITOR: From whom?

ACCOUNTANT: From the chief accountant in Chicago — top brass!

VISITOR: What did he say?

ACCOUNTANT: He told me that in the future I should expense every item that cost less than \$50. Even if it's a chair that will last five years I must expense it if it cost \$49 and capitalize it if it cost \$51. That's a hell of an arbitrary way to keep books.

VISITOR: (realizing that any classification system is man-made, and hoping to get his friend to see the point) How would you do it?

The visitor, expecting to hear the accountant say that he expensed items of a short life and capitalized long-lived items, was naturally surprised when he got the following answer.

ACCOUNTANT: I have always expensed everything an employee might steal.

VISITOR: Then you would expense a hand drill, but what about an electric drill?

ACCOUNTANT: Well, y-e-s-s — I'd expense it too because a man could put it under an overcoat and walk out of the plant.

VISITOR: (passing up the opportunity to point out that it should be expensed only in winter and capitalized in summer when there are no overcoats under which it could be hidden) What about your Johanson gauge blocks? (These are small blocks of steel accurately measured to within a few millionths of an inch, very expensive and normally kept in a box no larger than a 2 lb. box of candy.)

ACCOUNTANT: Oh, they're too expensive! You'd *have* to capitalize them!

The visitor could not convince the accountant that both his classification system and that of the Top Brass in Chicago were "right" and yet, in another sense, neither was "right" — that classification systems are merely tools of convenience. This story seems like a simple, inconsequential event. Yet shortly afterwards the Divisional Accountant resigned his job and moved his family 1,000 miles, seeking, I suppose, an environment he considered more congenial. The Divisional Accountant, apparently believing that classification systems are divinely ordained, was totally unable to weigh the relative merits of the alternative systems of classification. He could think only in terms of the inherent "rightness" of his view and the "wrongness" of the view of the Top Brass.

I SHOULD LIKE to suggest that, in teaching future plant managers how to manage and future accountants how to keep books, our colleges and universities also teach them a little elementary general semantics. I should like more men and women in business to know better than to get into such needless and costly wrangles as I have enumerated; I should like them to have some of the attitude towards language expressed by Samuel Butler when he wrote:

We want words to do more than they can. We try to do with them what comes to very much like trying to mend a watch with a pick or to paint a miniature with a mop; we expect them to help us to grip and dissect that which in ultimate essence is as ungrippable as shadow.