

# Is This Crystal Clear To You? Are You Sure?

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Are you sure? DIANE-SERIK-UNSPLASH

The question of clarity reminds me of the famous line in the 1992 movie *A Few Good Men*. In a fiery exchange between Jack Nicholson (on trial) and Tom Cruise (the lower-ranking prosecutor), the Marine Colonel responds from the witness stand:

“We follow orders or people die. It’s that simple. . . . Are we clear?”

The young prosecutor responds, “Yes, sir.”

“Are we *clear*?” Nicholson pushes further.

“Crystal.”

We can be equally confident that we’re communicating clearly when we are definitely not.

Yet, most of us think we communicate clearly. Otherwise, we wouldn’t talk or write with the words we use.

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## Case in Point

My husband and I used to get into “intense” discussions when we traveled together on business. No, the topic was never about airline delays or cancellations, what time to leave, or how many museums and activities we could or should cram into each day? (Although, each of those decisions are always matters that both of us like to chime in on frequently.)

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The arguments developed over restaurant selections. Invariably, he'd consult the Concierge's Desk for their recommendation on a good restaurant. And about 7 times out of 10, we'd be disappointed. Either the restaurant was too noisy for a conversation, they didn't take reservations and the wait proved to be too long, it took far too much travel time or effort, or the food turned out to be mediocre.

At one point in our travels, after so many disappointing dining experiences, I probed: "What exactly are you asking the Concierge?"

"What do you mean, 'what am I asking?' I just ask them to recommend a good restaurant."

Ah, that was the source of the disappointment—their definition for "good." For some Concierges (or friends), their "good" rating means one or several of the following things:

--"It's close by."

--"I like the steaks there."

--"The prices are reasonable for the quantities you get."

--"The décor and atmosphere are unique. It's a fun place."

--"Other guests have told me they enjoyed eating there."

--"There's lots of action—you can easily meet up with somebody."

--"We get a commission for every diner that we send there."

Once my spouse learned to phrase his questions differently—that is, *specifically*--we've enjoyed our dining experiences far more.

Consider the following words and phrases as you reflect on the clarity of your requests, demands, complaints, or overviews. In our communication training and consulting during the last three decades, we continue to find confusion in emails, policy statements, procedures, presentations, delegated assignments, contracts, sales meetings, and even marketing messages.

Here are some of the primary culprits:

### **“As Soon As Possible”**

Colleagues use this phrasing often when they’re asking their peers to do something or send something, but don’t actually have a supervisory role. They need the information immediately, but they think they’re being courteous and non-demanding—when actually they’re only being unclear.

People who hear this phrase routinely reflect: “Who’s asking?” If such a request comes from their boss, it must mean within the day. If from a colleague in another department, it may mean “when I get finished with the project I’m working on now.”

### **“In a Few Days”**

Ditto the same thinking as above. The biggest disconnect with this phrase happens between customers and suppliers. Supplier Hank says his staff members are all out on other jobs currently, but promises to send a repair person out when they’re available “in a few days.” The customer expects to have the repairs done in three to four days. The supplier has in mind any time in the next two weeks.

When that miscommunication happens, there goes the negative Yelp review.

## **“An Interesting Idea”**

After someone in a meeting presents a new approach to a problem, that comment can send a totally opposite message:

--“That’s an intriguing idea worth pursuing.”

--“I don’t understand what you mean clearly enough to give you a specific response.”

--“That’s a dumb idea, but I don’t want to be rude by saying so.”

In such cases, tone and facial expression may give away the real meaning—but not always.

## **“Let’s Meet to Discuss”**

When someone issues that invitation, the common comeback is a question: “Do you mean get together in your office? By Zoom? Or on the phone?”

## **“Acceptable Risks”**

Ask any investor about their “acceptable risks” in their portfolio, and you’ll get varied answers. That’s to be expected. They have different goals, different size portfolios, and different risk tolerance. That’s why their financial advisors typically ask their client investors to complete a lengthy questionnaire in an attempt to “nail down” what they consider “acceptable risks.” Otherwise, after the investor experiences a bull market, the shock can be crippling.

## **“Similar Cities”**

Is that reference to cities “similar” in geography, population, demographics, industries, climate, political environment and governance—or all of the previous?

## “Inadequate Facilities”

Why exactly are the facilities inadequate? Location? Size? Antiquated? Security? Unsuitable for the purpose? Listener’s choice on how to interpret this one!

## “Unavoidable Delays”

Typically, when companies disappoint customers or colleagues for mishaps (mis-shipments, missing project deadlines, failure to deliver on a promise), they apologize about “unavoidable delays” rather than owning up to the specifics.

When you use that phrasing, just keep in mind that customers typically don’t interpret charitably. Instead, they’re often thinking that either your staffer goofed, someone else down the line dropped the ball, or you’re just being “cagey” about the reasons. They assume it’s a coverup for the guilty party.

Granted, not everyone wants to be clear in a negative situation. But the next time you *intend* to be understood, make sure your words are specific and clear—crystal clear.

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