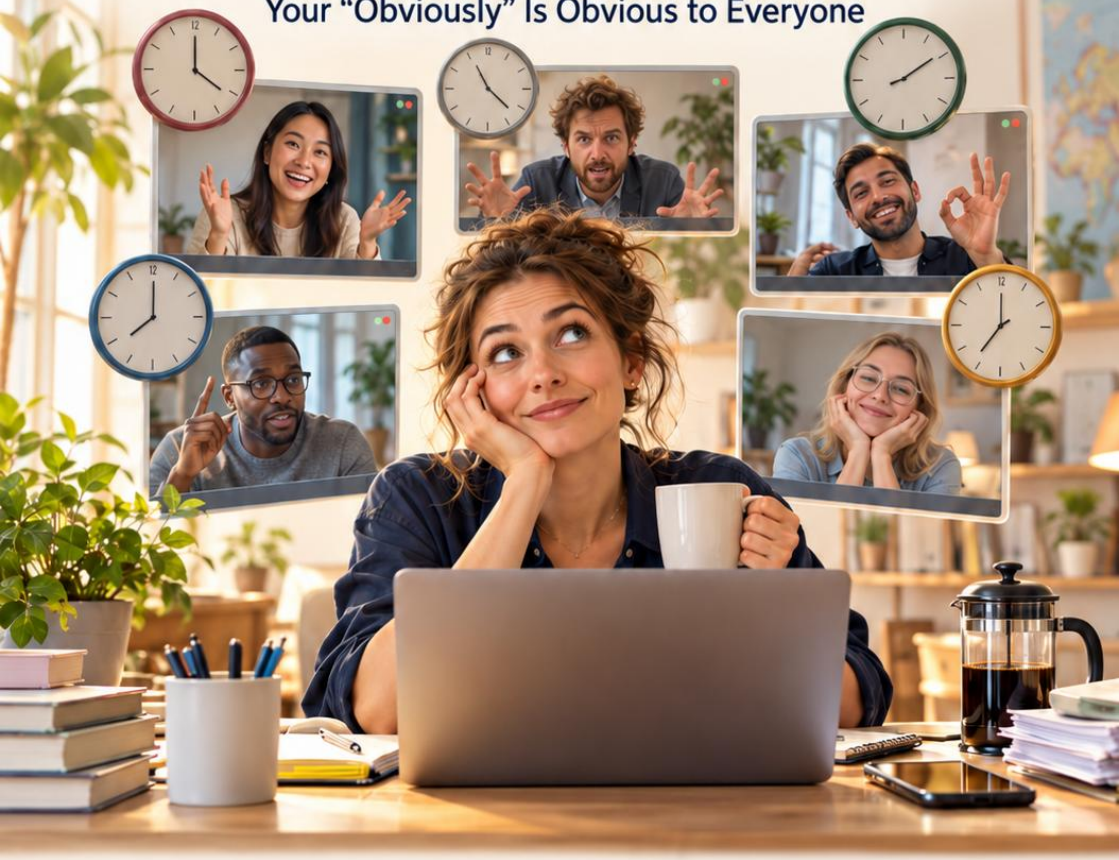
Max Paradox

PROBLEM? RELAX. YOU'VE GOT THIS!

A tongue-in-cheek guide series ;)

I Work with People from Five Countries and Everyone Has a Different Definition of "Urgent"

How to Align Communication Styles, Deadlines, and Expectations in an International Team Without Assuming Your "Obviously" Is Obvious to Everyone



We've got a problem. But relax. It can be solved—
and we'll even have something to laugh about.

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CONTENTS

INTRO 5

Chapter 1 - We All Speak English, So Why Are We Having Five Different Conversations? 11

Chapter 2 - When Yes Means Maybe and Silence Gets Promoted to Agreement 21

Chapter 3 - Five Definitions of Urgent and Only One Calendar 31

Chapter 4 - The Meeting About the Meeting: Why More Communication Can Mean Less Understanding 40

Chapter 5 - Everyone Is Polite, So Why Won't Anyone Say What They Really Think? 52

Chapter 6 - Headquarters Has One Plan, but Five Countries Have Five Different Realities 62

Chapter 7 - The Workday Never Ends, but Who Is Actually Holding the Steering Wheel? 73

Chapter 8 - Done for Whom? The Five-Country Quality Trap 82

Chapter 9 - One Page of Rules That Could Save Six Months of Misunderstandings 93

Chapter 10 - A Deadline Is Not a Wish with a Date Attached 103

Chapter 11 - Five Opinions, One Decision: How to Stop Discussing and Start Choosing 114

Chapter 12 - You Can't Have Everything: Negotiating Expectations Without Starting an International Incident 124

Chapter 13 - Escalation Without Accusation: How to Raise a Problem Without Starting a War Between Countries 136

Chapter 14 - Trust Across Five Countries: Working with People You Mostly Know as Tiny Faces on a Screen 147

Chapter 15 - That's How We Do Things Here: When Cultural Differences Become an Excuse 159

Chapter 16 - One Crisis, Five Countries, and Five Completely Different Versions of What Happened 170

Chapter 17 - When Better Communication Stops Working: The Limits of Your Influence 182

Chapter 18 - Three Weeks of Order, Then Chaos Returns: Making Good Habits Survive Real Life 192

Chapter 19 - What Happens When the Person Who Knows Everything Takes a Holiday? 202

Chapter 20 - Nobody Has Instructions for Tomorrow: Thinking Clearly When Five Countries Disagree Again 212

INTRO

At 9:38 on a Wednesday morning, a project manager in London opens a shared spreadsheet and discovers that five countries have reported their preparations for an upcoming product launch. Every country has selected the same reassuring status: “On track.” Excellent news. There is just one minor complication. The team in Madrid is waiting for final approval, the colleagues in Prague are still checking the technical requirements, the Italian office has interpreted the launch date as the deadline for submitting materials, and the German team considers its work complete because everything within its direct responsibility has been finished. Meanwhile, London has already informed senior management that the entire project is ready. Technically, everyone has provided an accurate update. Collectively, they have produced a masterpiece of coordinated misunderstanding.

If you have worked with colleagues across several countries, you probably recognize the uncomfortable feeling that follows such discoveries. You remember the meetings. You remember the confirmations. You may even remember someone enthusiastically declaring, “We're all on the same page.” Apparently, everyone was on a different page, possibly in a different document, and at least one person was reading an earlier version. The temptation is to identify the individual who misunderstood the instructions. Unfortunately, that approach often overlooks the more interesting problem: several intelligent, conscientious professionals can interpret the same agreement differently without realizing that any disagreement exists.

International teamwork creates a peculiar illusion. Because everyone can communicate in English, we assume everyone shares the same understanding of what has been communicated. Yet fluency in a common language does not automatically produce common expectations. Consider the word “urgent.” One colleague reserves it for situations requiring immediate intervention. Another uses it for anything that should receive attention before tomorrow. A third regards it as a polite way of emphasizing importance, while someone else considers every request from senior management urgent by definition. Nobody has necessarily misunderstood the dictionary. They have attached different practical consequences to the same word. The difficulty begins when those consequences determine what people actually do.

The problem extends far beyond deadlines. What does it mean when someone says a document is ready? Does “I agree” indicate personal support, formal approval, or merely an understanding of the proposal? If a manager asks you to “take ownership,” are you expected to coordinate the people involved, make the final decision, or personally complete the work? These distinctions may appear trivial until they affect a project involving several departments and thousands of customers. Small uncertainties can travel surprisingly far through an organization. By the time someone discovers that a crucial decision was never formally made, half the team may have organized its schedule around the assumption that it was.

There is also an emotional cost that never appears in project dashboards. A colleague begins to seem unreliable because they repeatedly deliver something different from what you expected. A manager appears controlling because

they constantly request clarification and confirmation. Someone who communicates cautiously is interpreted as uncommitted, while a direct speaker earns a reputation for being difficult. Each incident adds another small piece to an increasingly unflattering picture of the people involved. Eventually, you stop asking what went wrong and start predicting which colleague will cause the next problem. That is a dangerous moment. Once irritation becomes a substitute for curiosity, even ordinary misunderstandings can begin to feel like personal attacks.

It would be wonderfully convenient if every country came with an official communication manual. You could consult a chart, adjust your tone, select the appropriate response time, and enjoy flawless international cooperation. Unfortunately, people are considerably less predictable than their passports. National culture can influence communication, but so can professional experience, company traditions, organizational hierarchy, personality, language confidence, and the consequences of speaking openly in a particular workplace. Two colleagues living in the same city may have completely different expectations about feedback. People separated by thousands of miles may cooperate effortlessly because they share similar professional habits. Cultural awareness is useful when it encourages questions. It becomes a liability when it provides ready-made explanations before anyone has examined the facts.

Many organizations respond to communication difficulties by communicating more. They schedule additional meetings, create new reporting templates, establish dedicated chat channels, and copy increasingly senior people into ordinary correspondence. Sometimes these measures genuinely improve coordination. Just as often, they multiply the places

where competing versions of reality can flourish. A decision made during a video call is interpreted one way in an email and recorded differently in a project-management system. Everyone is exceptionally well informed about the fact that communication is taking place. What nobody can establish is which instruction currently applies. More information does not automatically create greater clarity, particularly when nobody has agreed on what the information is supposed to accomplish.

Power and practical constraints complicate matters further. A junior employee may recognize that a deadline is unrealistic but feel uncomfortable challenging an enthusiastic director. A local manager may agree to support a regional initiative without having the authority to assign the necessary staff. A specialist may appear unresponsive because their working day overlaps with yours for barely an hour. And sometimes the uncomfortable truth is that everyone understands the request perfectly well, but the organization simply lacks the resources to deliver it. These situations cannot all be fixed with better wording. Effective communication must reveal genuine limitations rather than disguise them beneath increasingly sophisticated expressions of optimism.

The good news is that you do not need to become an international negotiator, amateur anthropologist, or full-time interpreter of corporate subtext. You can begin by recognizing moments when an important agreement depends on an unstated assumption. Suppose a colleague requests an update “as soon as possible.” Instead of immediately abandoning your current work, you might ask whether they need the completed analysis today or an initial estimate of when it can be delivered. That distinction can

change the entire task. The question is not unnecessary bureaucracy; it establishes what useful action looks like. Of course, a genuine emergency may require immediate intervention rather than leisurely clarification. Good judgment means recognizing which situations require additional precision and which already have established procedures.

Throughout this book, we will examine the habits that make cooperation unnecessarily difficult and the practical choices that can make it more predictable. You will learn how to approach conflicting expectations, negotiate deadlines, handle disagreement, distinguish genuine commitments from optimistic statements, and work across organizational and geographical boundaries. We will also consider what happens when reasonable conversations fail, because some obstacles require decisions, resources, or management intervention rather than another beautifully phrased message. You will not find a promise that every colleague can be persuaded to cooperate or that every disagreement has a cheerful solution. Real organizations contain competing interests, limited budgets, imperfect systems, and people who occasionally behave as though the laws of time apply exclusively to other departments.

Most importantly, you will not be asked to abandon your own communication style or make everyone else adopt it. The aim is to develop a shared understanding of what matters while allowing people to remain different. Successful international cooperation does not require five countries to think alike, enjoy identical working hours, or express disagreement in exactly the same way. It requires enough clarity to make responsible decisions, enough trust to raise difficult questions, and enough common sense to

recognize when an assumption needs testing. The next time somebody confidently announces that everything is obvious, you may discover that the most useful response is a calm, respectful question. Because “obvious” is a wonderful word right up until five people act on five different meanings of it.

Chapter 1 - We All Speak English, So Why Are We Having Five Different Conversations?

The trouble began with the word "support." Nothing dramatic, nothing suspicious, just seven ordinary letters sitting innocently in the middle of a project proposal. A European company was preparing to introduce a new service across five countries, and the regional team had agreed that local offices would provide customer support during the launch. Everyone seemed satisfied. The agreement appeared in the meeting notes, the responsibilities spreadsheet, and the project presentation. Then, three weeks before launch, someone asked what local support actually included. One office expected to answer customer questions. Another believed it would handle complaints and refunds. A third thought its responsibility ended after directing customers to the regional help desk. The remaining two had assumed that the technical team would manage everything. Five countries had agreed to provide support. Unfortunately, they had agreed to five different jobs.

This is one of the most expensive little tricks that workplace language plays on intelligent people. A word can be perfectly familiar while its practical meaning remains wonderfully unstable. Nobody misunderstood the spelling of "support." Nobody needed another English lesson. The disagreement concerned what people were expected to do because that word had appeared in an agreement. Once a familiar expression enters a professional conversation, we tend to assume that its meaning is already settled. Asking for

a definition can feel unnecessary, even slightly embarrassing. Surely everyone knows what customer support means? Apparently not, and by the time the difference becomes visible, somebody may already have hired staff, promised a service level, or informed a customer that assistance will be available.

A shared language is an extraordinary advantage, but it is not a shared operating system. People bring their professional histories into every conversation. Someone who previously worked in a tightly regulated organization may understand approval as a formal decision recorded by an authorized person. A colleague from a smaller company may use the same word to describe a manager's verbal agreement. An engineer, a salesperson, and a financial controller can listen to the same project update while interpreting its implications through completely different responsibilities. Add the fact that English may be a second or third language for several participants, and the potential for confusion becomes impressive. The surprising part is not that misunderstandings happen. It is that we manage to accomplish so much while constantly assuming that everyone else has received our invisible instruction manual.

The invisible definitions hiding inside ordinary words

Consider the phrase "We own this process." It sounds reassuring and wonderfully responsible. But ownership can describe several different relationships with a task. The owner might perform the work personally, coordinate the people performing it, approve the final result, or simply remain accountable when something goes wrong. If those responsibilities are not distinguished, one person can believe that ownership means making decisions while another assumes it means providing updates. A third person

may be quietly completing the actual work, having discovered that everyone else is extremely busy owning it. The resulting confusion is not necessarily a personality problem. It may be an entirely predictable consequence of assigning responsibility using language that conceals several possibilities.

The same thing happens with project milestones. A commercial manager announces that a market is "launched," meaning that customers can purchase the service. The technical team uses the word after the system becomes operational. The communications department considers the launch complete once the public campaign begins. None of these definitions is inherently foolish. They simply describe different events in a larger process. If leadership requests the number of launched markets without establishing the relevant event, the organization may produce an attractive chart containing figures that should never have been compared. The information looks precise because it contains numbers. Precision in presentation, however, cannot compensate for disagreement about what is being measured.

You might reasonably wonder whether the solution is to define every word that appears in professional correspondence. Thankfully, no. That would produce an organization in which nobody could request a coffee without first approving the operational meaning of "coffee," "request," and "reasonably soon." Most ordinary expressions work perfectly well because the context is sufficient or the consequences of misunderstanding are small. The important skill is recognizing where an ambiguous word connects to a decision, a financial commitment, a handover, or a customer's experience. If two interpretations

would lead people to perform different actions, the meaning deserves attention. If neither interpretation changes anything important, you can probably allow language to remain human.

This distinction makes clarification more practical. Rather than asking people to define abstract concepts, ask them to describe observable results. When someone says that customer support is ready, find out whether staff have been trained, access to the system has been provided, and responsibility for particular requests has been assigned. When a colleague claims to own a process, establish which decisions they can make and which activities depend on others. These questions turn appealing language into something that can guide work. A person may sincerely believe a process is ready while still lacking information necessary for its actual operation. Describing the evidence of readiness reveals that difference without requiring anyone to defend their vocabulary.

Professional abbreviations introduce another layer of difficulty. Organizations develop dialects made from acronyms, internal product names, and expressions inherited from previous reorganizations. Long-serving employees use them effortlessly because they remember the situations in which they were created. New colleagues often learn to recognize the sounds long before they understand the underlying processes. They may hesitate to ask what an abbreviation means after hearing everyone else use it confidently for several weeks. Unfortunately, an acronym does not become self-explanatory through repeated exposure. It merely becomes increasingly embarrassing to question. A meeting can therefore contain twelve references to the same mysterious three-letter term

while half the participants quietly hope that its meaning will eventually reveal itself through context.

When familiarity produces false confidence

The danger is particularly pronounced when people work together frequently. Early in a professional relationship, both sides tend to clarify unfamiliar terminology. After several months, they begin to rely on assumptions about each other's understanding. This is often useful. Experienced colleagues should not need to explain every routine task from the beginning. But familiarity can also preserve outdated expectations. Perhaps a colleague previously had authority to approve supplier changes and has since moved to a role without that authority. Perhaps a reporting process changed while one country continued using the original definitions. People believe they know what the other person means because they used to know. The relationship appears efficient until an important assumption turns out to have expired.

Imagine receiving a request to prepare a "customer overview." Last year, that meant a breakdown of sales by customer category. This year, your regional colleague expects information about customer retention and complaints. You deliver the familiar report, receive a disappointed response, and begin wondering why the requirements changed without warning. From the other person's perspective, the new purpose may have been obvious because the company has spent months discussing customer retention. Neither person necessarily ignored instructions. They relied on different background information. Before judging the quality of the request or the response, it is worth establishing which expectations were

explicit and which existed only in someone's understanding of the wider business.

The most useful clarification frequently comes before work begins, when changing direction is still inexpensive. Suppose someone asks for a regional performance overview. You could spend several hours producing an elaborate document and discover afterward that they needed only three indicators for a management discussion. Alternatively, you could ask what decision the overview is intended to support and which comparisons matter. This may reveal that the request concerns a particular customer segment rather than the whole business. The additional question takes very little time compared with preparing the wrong analysis. It also respects the recipient's needs by making the result more useful, rather than merely more comprehensive.

There is an important social dimension to these conversations. People rarely enjoy being told that their instructions were unclear, especially in front of colleagues. "Your request doesn't make sense" may be an accurate description of your frustration, but it is not always an effective opening. A more productive response identifies the decision requiring clarification: "I can prepare the overview by market or by customer segment. Which would be more useful for the discussion?" You have not accused anyone of communicating badly. You have shown that two reasonable interpretations exist and invited the requester to select one. This matters in international teams where participants may already feel uncertain about communicating in a language they do not use at home.

The ability to clarify without humiliating somebody becomes even more important when the person asking is

senior. A director may use a broad expression because they assume their team understands the context. A junior specialist may notice the missing information but feel uncomfortable questioning it. If the specialist silently chooses an interpretation, the director may later be disappointed by the result. Both would have benefited from a professional question. Leaders can make this easier by treating sensible clarification as part of good execution rather than evidence that an employee lacks initiative. The objective is to reduce avoidable uncertainty before it becomes expensive, not to reward people for pretending they understood everything immediately.

Make shared language visible where it matters

For recurring processes, teams can establish a small collection of operational definitions. These are not dictionary entries. They describe how important words affect the work. In a customer-service project, "resolved" might mean that the issue has been addressed and the required record completed, rather than merely that somebody has sent a response. In a regional reporting process, an "active customer" might require an explicitly defined activity within a specified period. Different teams may need different definitions, and some terms will have legally or technically prescribed meanings that cannot be freely redesigned. The important point is to establish an authoritative meaning for the particular process and make it accessible to those who use it.

This does not require creating a vast corporate encyclopedia. Begin with the expressions that have already produced confusion or have the greatest potential consequences. If everyone regularly disagrees about what counts as an approved expense, clarify that. If the word

"feedback" is functioning perfectly well, leave it alone. An effective reference may contain only a handful of terms, each connected to a practical action or measurable condition. Its value comes from being used during real work, not from possessing an impressive title such as Global Semantic Alignment Governance Framework. A document can be extremely sophisticated and still fail the basic test of helping somebody complete a task.

An equally useful habit is checking understanding through the next action rather than demanding a general statement of agreement. After a complicated discussion, asking "Does everyone understand?" often produces reassuring answers, even when important differences remain. People may believe they understand, dislike appearing confused, or assume the question is rhetorical. Instead, the person responsible for each part can describe what will happen next. One team might explain that it will configure the system, another that it will verify customer information, and a third that it will authorize publication. If the actions do not fit together, the mismatch becomes visible while there is still time to correct it. This is a practical test of shared meaning, not a school examination.

There are limits, of course. Some problems remain genuinely uncertain after everyone agrees on the terminology. A supplier might not know when a shipment will arrive. A system may behave unpredictably, or a customer may change their requirements. Clear communication cannot manufacture certainty where none exists. It can, however, prevent uncertainty about the situation from being confused with uncertainty about what people have agreed to do. These are different problems. One requires managing incomplete knowledge; the other requires improving

coordination. Treating them separately makes both easier to address.

The most revealing moment often comes after a misunderstanding. You can focus on identifying who used the wrong expression, or you can investigate which interpretations were reasonable at the time. What information did each person possess? Which instructions were explicit? At what point did their expectations begin to diverge? This approach does not excuse careless work or deliberate misrepresentation. It helps identify whether the same problem could affect somebody else under similar circumstances. If several competent people can reasonably interpret an instruction differently, adjusting the instruction may be considerably more effective than repeatedly reminding everyone to pay closer attention.

Over time, successful international teams develop a useful kind of professional humility. They know that familiarity with a word is not proof of agreement about its consequences. They recognize that expertise in one function does not automatically provide the vocabulary or assumptions of another. Most importantly, they become comfortable asking precise questions without treating those questions as signs of incompetence. They still speak English with different accents, employ their favorite workplace expressions, and occasionally produce sentences that could keep a linguist entertained for hours. But where important action depends on meaning, they establish enough common ground to move forward.

The goal is not to eliminate ambiguity from every conversation. Human language would become unbearably tedious if every sentence required formal verification. The goal is to notice when apparently familiar words are carrying

an unfamiliar obligation. A team that can identify those moments will spend less time repairing misunderstandings and more time doing the work it originally intended to accomplish. And if somebody announces that the next project needs "full support," you may finally have the courage to ask what that involves before accidentally accepting responsibility for running an entire department.

Chapter 2 - When Yes Means Maybe and Silence Gets Promoted to Agreement

Imagine being responsible for organizing a regional training program. You have secured a budget, booked a venue, and prepared a schedule that requires five country managers to release selected employees from their normal duties for two days. During the planning meeting, you ask whether everyone can support the arrangement. Four participants say yes. The fifth smiles, nods, and observes that the timing may be "a little challenging." You record four approvals and one minor concern. A week later, two countries have not nominated anyone, another has misunderstood the staffing requirement, and the supposedly minor concern has become a complete refusal. Nobody appears surprised except you. You thought the meeting produced an agreement. Apparently, it produced a collection of interesting noises that sounded sufficiently positive to justify booking a conference center.

The word "yes" is often treated as the simplest possible answer. Yet in professional conversations, a positive response may serve several purposes that have little to do with accepting responsibility. Someone might be acknowledging that they heard you, expressing general support for an idea, confirming that something seems possible, or making an actual commitment. The distinction is especially important when participants have different relationships with authority or different levels of confidence speaking the meeting's common language. You cannot reliably determine what someone has committed to merely

by examining the enthusiasm of their response. A colleague can say yes with tremendous conviction and still be answering a different question from the one you intended.

A useful starting point is to distinguish agreement about an idea from the willingness and authority to carry it out. Suppose a manager says, "Yes, I think the training would be valuable." That tells you something about their judgment of the proposal. It does not establish whether employees are available, whether the necessary budget has been approved locally, or whether the manager can release them from existing assignments. Asking for an operational commitment requires another conversation. It may feel unnecessarily formal to separate these steps, but doing so prevents the familiar situation in which everyone supports an initiative enthusiastically until somebody asks them to provide people, money, or actual working hours.

The hidden cost of making disagreement uncomfortable

People do not always express reservations as directly as their colleagues expect. Some prefer to establish a positive relationship before discussing a problem. Others have learned through professional experience that openly challenging a senior person can carry unpleasant consequences. An employee may hesitate because they lack information, need permission from another department, or want to avoid embarrassing the person presenting the proposal. These motivations should not be assigned automatically to nationalities. They can occur in virtually any workplace, particularly where hierarchy is strong and previous disagreement has been poorly received.

Consider a department head presenting a proposal that has clearly received considerable attention from senior management. The slides are polished, several executives

are present, and the presenter has already referred to the project as an important strategic initiative. An employee recognizes that the proposed timetable conflicts with a major local obligation. Technically, they are free to speak. Practically, raising the issue means interrupting an enthusiastic presentation and potentially appearing uncooperative in front of influential colleagues. The employee might choose to discuss the matter privately afterward. By then, however, the proposal may already have been announced as agreed. An invitation to speak does not automatically remove the perceived consequences of speaking.

The person leading the discussion has considerable influence over whether participants reveal their reservations. A vague question such as "Is everyone happy?" encourages a social response rather than a detailed operational assessment. People may genuinely like the idea while doubting its feasibility. A better approach is to ask which conditions must be satisfied before each team can commit. This allows participants to identify constraints without presenting themselves as opponents of the project. Someone can say that the plan depends on an additional approval, unavailable equipment, or a change to another assignment. The conversation becomes less about enthusiasm and more about the practical circumstances necessary for success.

There is another complication: people sometimes remain uncertain about the question itself. A senior manager asking "Can we do this?" might be requesting a technical feasibility assessment, a resource commitment, or permission to announce a launch date. Different participants can answer different aspects without realizing it. If you are facilitating