

BEP 35 - Clarifying Meaning

Welcome back again to Business English Pod and the second in our two-part series on clarifying.

In the BEP 34, we talked about clarifying what was said, for example, "What did you just say? I didn't catch that."

In today's show, we'll look at clarifying what was *meant*, for example, "What do you mean by that?" or "What I'm trying to say is..." Clarifying the meaning is an important part of all communication because it helps us avoid misunderstanding.

Today's listening comes from SwiftWire, a start-up technology company. A "start up" is a new company. Michael is the founder of SwiftWire; "Founder" means he's the one who started the company. He's talking to two colleagues, Ryan, the chief technology officer, and Rachel, the marketing director. They are discussing the recent launch of a new product line.

While you listen, pay attention to the language they use to clarify meaning.

Vocabulary

expectations – a confident belief or strong hope that something will happen

come to grips – to understand or accept something

isn't pretty – not good

challenge – a situation that will test a person or groups abilities

work cut out for us – a lot of effort will be required

salvage – to save a project

scrap – to get rid of something or stop work on a project or idea

afloat – to keep the company going

investor – a person who provides money to or buys shares in a company

enthusiastic – to show strong interest in something

responsibility – to accept the blame for a problem or to accountable for something

adjustments – to make changes

redundancies – to dismiss (or lay off) employees due to problems with the company

Listening Comprehension Questions:

1. Is Michael happy with the result of the product launch?
2. What will happen to the product line?
3. Who does Ryan believe will support the company?
4. Is George as confident as Ryan that the company will be supported by its investors?
5. In asking for clarification of George's reference to "adjustments", what does Rachel think he means?

Dialog:

Michael: The news isn't great I'm afraid. I know all of us had very high expectations for the launch, but we're going to have come to grips with the situation.

Rachel: Sorry, but I don't quite see what you mean. What are you getting at?

Michael: Well, Rachel, what I'm saying is... we've had a closer look at the numbers, and it isn't pretty.

Ryan: I see. So in other words, you're saying it's been a complete failure? Is that right?

Michael: That would be one way of looking at it. I prefer to see it as a challenge. But to salvage this situation, we really have our work cut out for us.

Rachel: What exactly do you mean by "salvage?" Do you think we are going to have to scrap the whole product line?

Michael: I'm afraid so. Actually, I'm thinking about how to salvage the company. It's going to take everything we have just to keep this company afloat.

Ryan: Is it really that bad? I mean, we do have strong investor support don't we?

Michael: Let me make sure I understand what you mean. You're asking if our investors will stay with us through this, is that right?

Ryan: Yeah, that's right. I mean, they've been very enthusiastic from the beginning. There's always going to be a few problems along the way.

Michael: Well, unfortunately, it's not that simple. They want to know who is going to take responsibility for this mess. They want to see some major adjustments, you see.

Rachel: Wait a second. What do you mean by "adjustment"? We're not talking about redundancies here, are we?

Michael: (sigh) Actually, it's funny you should mention that, Rachel. You know, no one has contributed more to this project than you have. And we all really appreciate that...

Debrief:

It doesn't look so good for Rachel, does it?

Let's go through the dialogue together and look at the language that the three colleagues use to clarify what they say.

Also, along the way, we'll take a look at some of the idioms they use.

Listen to the beginning again.

Michael: The news isn't great I'm afraid. I know all of us had very high expectations for the launch, but we're going to have come to grips with the situation.

What does it mean "to come to grips with the situation?" "To grip" something is to hold something tightly in your hand. "To come to grips with" is an idiom that means to fully understand or accept a difficult a situation. So Michael is preparing everyone for bad news.

But Michael's statement a little unclear, is it? Another way to say unclear is "vague"—it's open to interpretation. To understand better, Rachel asks for clarification.

Rachel: Sorry, but I don't quite see what you mean. What are you getting at?

"What exactly are you getting at?" is a useful expression to clarify meaning when something is vague. You could also say:

- What exactly do you mean by that?
- Sorry, what do you mean by that?
- I don't quite see what you mean. Could you be a little more specific?
- Sorry, I'm not with you. Could you explain what you mean?
- Sorry, I don't follow you. Could you run through that again?
- Sorry, that was totally clear to me. What exactly are you driving at?

Okay, let's get back to the dialogue. Remember, Rachel has just asked for clarification. How does Michael respond?

Michael: Well, Rachel, what I'm saying is... we've had a closer look at the numbers, and it isn't pretty.

Michael uses the phrase "what I'm saying is..." to clarify his meaning. He doesn't *need* to say this, but perhaps it gives him a little time to think. There are many other expressions he could use, for example,

- I think what I'm getting at is that...
- What I mean to say is that...
- To make a long story short...

Now, when Michael says “the numbers aren’t pretty,” he’s still being very vague, isn’t he? Ryan decides to use his own words to check.

Ryan: I see. So in other words, you’re saying it’s been a complete failure? Is that right?

What is Ryan doing? First he acknowledges Michael by saying “I see.” Then he checks back—“So in other words....” Then he confirms—“Is that right?” Acknowledge, check back, and confirm. Let’s practice that.

A: I just think it’s been really hard. And, well, you know. It’s not the best way to do things.

B: Uh huh. Let me make sure I understand what you mean. You’re saying that this is just not going to work, right?

A: Well, let’s see. I think it’s just time to try something different.

B: Okay. Let me get this straight. What you mean is that we’ve got to invent a new strategy. Have I got that right?

A: It’s important that we keep the quality high at any cost.

B: I understand. So, we’re not going to put profit before quality. Am I correct?

Acknowledging, checking back and confirming is a useful skill. It can be used for simple things, like checking a phone number, as well as more complex things, like making sure you understand a vague customer demand.

Now, Ryan has just asked Michael if he thinks the project was a complete failure, right? So how does Michael reply?

Michael: That would be one way of looking at it. I prefer to see it as a challenge. To salvage this situation, we really have our work cut out for us.

“Salvage” means to save. “To have your work cut out for you” means that you have a lot of work to do. So Michael thinks the project can be saved, but it’s going to take hard work.

Isn’t it interesting how Michael is negotiating with his colleagues about how to look at the situation? When Ryan asks if the project is a failure, Michael says “That would be one way of looking at it. I prefer to see it as a challenge.”

While clarifying, we’re not always *just* trying to make something clear? Sometimes we’re also trying to get people to see things our way, aren’t we? This is negotiating the meaning. Listen to another example:

A: I think he’s hard to work with.

B: That’s one way of looking at it. I think he’s impossible.

So back in our dialogue, Michael has just said that it’s going to take a lot of hard work to salvage the situation. How does Rachel respond?

Rachel: What exactly do you mean by “salvage?” Do you think we are going to have to scrap the whole product line?

Rachel asks if the project will need to be “scrapped.” To scrap something is to throw it away. Notice that she asks for clarification about a specific word—salvage. She says, “What exactly do you mean by ‘salvage.’” This is a good expression for asking about a single word or expression. Here are some other phrases you can use.

Could you just go over what you mean by “a big change”?

Sorry, I don’t understand exactly what you mean when you say “come to grips”?

Can we just go back for a moment to what you said about timing? I’m not quite sure what you mean by “as soon as possible”?

Let’s get back to the dialogue again. Remember, Rachel has just asked Michael what he means by “salvage”? Does he mean that the product will need to be scrapped?

Michael: I’m afraid so. Actually, I’m thinking about how to salvage the company. It’s going to take everything we have just to keep this company afloat.

Michael says it’s going to take everything they have—all of their effort—just to keep the company afloat. Afloat means floating, like a boat. It’s going to take a lot of hard work to keep the company from sinking or going out of business.

Notice how Michael uses “Actually....” This is a way of introducing something that is new or surprising. Michael is not just worried about salvaging the project; *actually*, he’s worried about the whole company. This is another kind of clarifying the meaning. Listen to another example.

A: So what you’re getting at is that we need to get a new computer system right away?

B: Sorry, that’s not exactly what I’m saying. Actually, I think we can use the current system a little while longer.

Great. Before we finish the program today, let’s listen again to the end of the dialogue. Michael has just said that there needs to be some adjustments—some changes—in the way they do things.

Rachel: Wait a second. What do you mean by “adjustment”? We’re not talking about redundancies here, are we?

What does Rachel mean by “redundancies”? This is a nice way to talk about laying off or dismissing employees. “Redundant” means repeated or extra. To make people redundant means to dismiss them because their job no longer exists. So redundancies refers to dismissals from work.

When Rachel asks whether there are going to be redundancies, she is asking whether anyone is going to get fired. How does Michael reply?

Michael: (sigh) Actually, it's funny you should mention that, Rachel. You know, no one has contributed more to this project than you have. And we ...

"It's funny you should mention that...." is a way of directing the conversation. Here "funny" means coincidental—something that happens by chance. This phrase refers to what someone just said in order to change or build on the topic. Listen to another example.

A: I just ran into in the elevator after he met with the boss. He looked a little nervous.

B: Really? It's funny you should mention that. I mean, I saw his manager just now, and he was looking pretty angry. I wonder what's going on?

So in our dialogue, it sounds like Michael is using the chance that Rachel gives him to bring up the subject of firing someone. Who do you think it's going to be? If I were Rachel, I'd be pretty nervous.

Well, that's it for today's show. We've looked at a variety of ways to clarify what we mean, including asking for clarification, acknowledging, checking back and confirming, and negotiating the meaning. We've also looked at a wide range of useful idioms.

Language Review Questions:

Complete the sentences below using the words from the box:

investor	come to grips with	redundancies
scrap	challenge	

1. The tests were a complete failure so we had to _____ the project.
2. If we want to makes this a success, we need to _____ the problems.
3. The project wasn't a complete failure but it will be a big _____ to meet our original objectives.
4. Our _____ are not going to be happy if we miss our sales targets.
5. US automobile manufacturers plan to announce more _____ this week in order to control costs.

Useful Language:

1. Asking for clarification

- What exactly do you mean by that?
- Sorry, what do you mean by that?
- I don't quite see what you mean. Could you be a little more specific?
- Sorry, I'm not with you. Could you explain what you mean?
- Sorry, I don't follow you. Could you run through that again?
- Sorry, that was totally clear to me. What exactly are you driving at?

2. Giving clarification

- I think what I'm getting at is that...
- What I mean to say is that...
- To make a long story short...

3. Acknowledge, check back and confirm

A: I just think it's been really hard. And, you know. It's not the best way to do things.

B: Uh huh. Let me make sure I understand what you mean. You're saying that this is just not going to work, right?

A: Well, let's see. I think it's just time to try something different.

B: Okay. Let me get this straight. What you mean is that we've got to invent a new strategy. Have I got that right?

A: It's important that we keep the quality high at any cost.

B: I understand. So, we're not going to put profit before quality. Am I correct?

4. Negotiating the meaning

A: I think he's hard to work with.

B: That's one way of looking at it. I think he's impossible.

5. Asking for clarification about a specific word or expression

- Could you just go over what you mean by "a big change"?
- Sorry, I don't understand exactly what you mean when you say "come to grips"?
- Can we just go back for a moment to what you said about timing? I'm not quite sure what you mean by "as soon as possible"?

6. Using "actually" to correct a misunderstanding:

A: So what you're getting at is that we need to get a new computer system right away?

B: Sorry, that's not exactly what I'm saying. Actually, I think we can use the current system a little while longer.

Answers

Listening Comprehension:

1. No
2. It might be scrapped
3. Investors
4. Not without big changes
5. Redundancies

Language review:

1. scrap
2. come to grips
3. challenge
4. investor
5. redundancies