

# Why ‘Black Belt’ Almost Got Lost in Translation



The telephone game on the warehouse floor —  
and what it teaches us about  
communication reliability

By Adriane ‘Ace’ Crabtree, LSSBB  
Author, *Failure to Communicate:  
The #1 Reason Teams Fail —  
and How to Fix It*



**One phrase.  
Two different pictures.**

I said ‘black belt’ and meant Lean Six Sigma.  
My associate heard ‘black belt’  
and pictured karate.  
That small gap in context became  
a real-life example of the telephone game.

**Same words. Different picture.**

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# The Real Floor Moment



“Black belt”  
meant one thing  
to me — and  
something else to her.



**My picture:** Lean Six Sigma Black Belt



**Her picture:** Karate



**Result:** Same words. Different meaning.



That is where the telephone game started.

# The Telephone Game Starts Early



The message did not fail because anyone was careless. It failed because the context was missing.

1



A phrase is heard:  
'black belt'



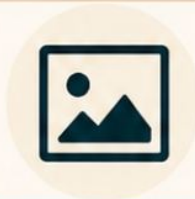
2



The listener fills the gap  
with the picture they  
already know



3



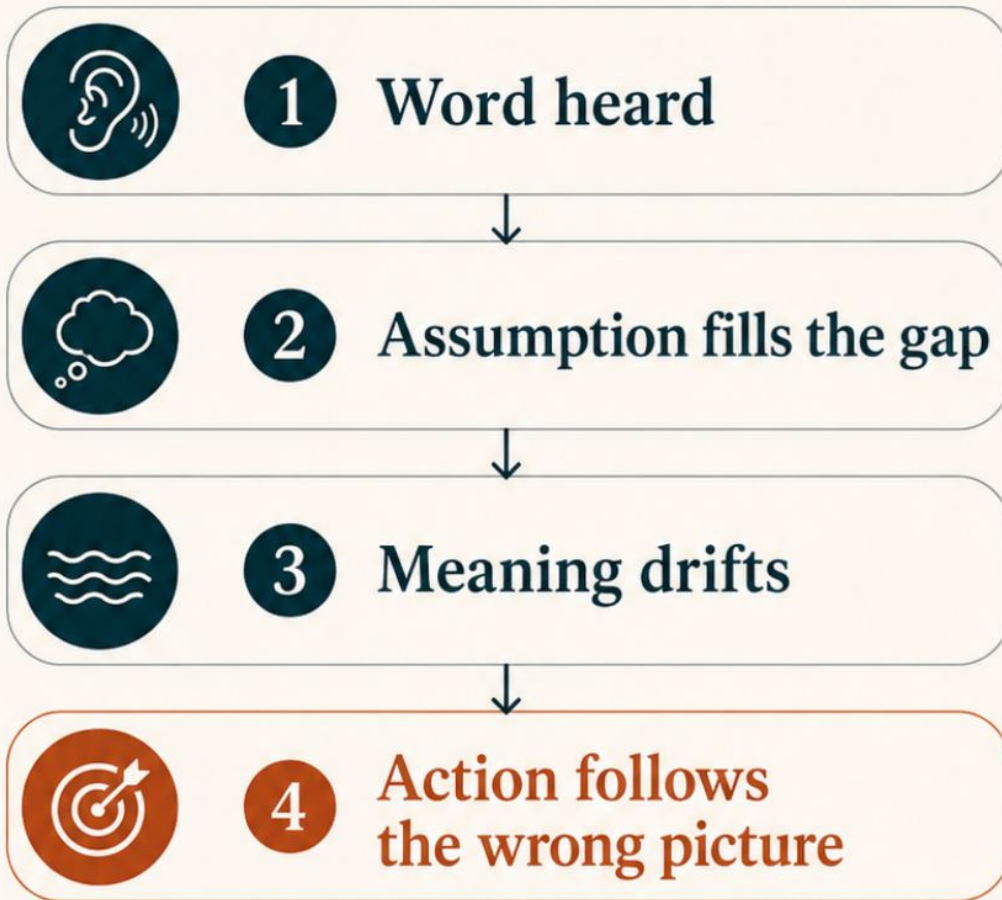
Same words.  
**Different picture.**



Miscommunication often begins  
before the message is ever repeated.

# The Silent Spiral™

How meaning quietly drifts on the floor.



The breakdown is often quiet long before it becomes visible.



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# Breaking the Spiral™

FROM THE  
FLOOR  
PRESS

Four ways to interrupt the wrong picture.



## 1. Pause the story

Stop the automatic narrative.  
Give yourself space to listen  
before meaning takes over.



## 2. Ask what the word means

Surface assumptions early.  
Don't let a single word drive  
a wrong picture.



## 3. Translate the context

Check what's really happening.  
Clarify the situation behind  
the message.



## 4. Confirm the picture

Validate understanding before  
you act. Align on what you  
both see.



## Ask for the picture before the assumption hardens.



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# Why This Matters on the Floor



The same pattern shows up in everyday operations.



## Urgent

One person hears today.  
Another hears end of week.



## Clean this up

One person hears housekeeping.  
Another hears system correction.



## Quality issue

One person hears blame.  
Another hears investigation.



Communication fails when people  
keep talking while picturing different things.



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