Microspeak: Pencils down

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Raymond Chen

I'm particularly fascinated by Microspeak terms which nobody actually knows the meaning of. You can defend jargon by saying that it's a shorthand way of talking in order to improve communication, but if nobody actually knows what it means, the *in order to improve communication* part is completely turned on its head. The Microspeak that allegedly allows people to communicate better ends up making them communicate worse.

A colleague of mine introduced me to this new type of Microspeak. Our conversation takes place in an impromptu hallway meeting between the development manager and a few members of the team.

Team member: "What does this mean for our milestone? I'm assuming it means that our features are code complete."

Development manager: *It means you are pencils down.*

Team member: (confused) "What does 'pencils down' mean?"

— *It means your features are done for the milestone.*

"Where did that term come from?"

— *A meeting with «senior executive».*

"Okay, so what does 'done' mean?"

— *It means you are pencils down.*

"What *exactly* does that mean?"

— *It means you don't have to write any new code for your features.*

"Oh, okay. So it means code complete."

— *No, that means something different.*

"How are they different?"

— *I don't know.*

"Has anyone sent any email defining what 'pencils down' means?"

— *Not that I know of.*

My colleague has yet to find anybody who can provide a definition of the term *pencils down.*

This sort of confirms <u>what my colleague Michael Grier mentioned in a comment</u>: The intended purpose for this jargon is not to communicate with the people who work for you but to impress the people you work *for*.

<u>Raymond Chen</u>

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