

The Half You Think You Know

We inherit the phrase and assume we inherited the meaning. We rarely did.

Mike Thomas · Founder & Director · 6 min read · August 2026

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Tomorrow morning I start teaching a two-day first aid course, and before I've opened the manual I can already tell you two of the questions I'll be asked. I know because they come up on almost every course I run.

The first is this: is there a difference between a break and a fracture?

There isn't. A fracture is a break in the bone — that is all the word means. A hairline crack and a bone snapped clean in two are both fractures, both breaks. The confusion isn't in the injury. It's in the words. Different people, different countries, different training backgrounds reach for a different one, and somewhere along the line we start to assume the two words must describe two different things. They don't. But the belief that they might is enough to make someone hesitate at exactly the moment they shouldn't.

That's a harmless example. Hold onto it, because the same thing happens with ideas that aren't harmless at all.

The wisdom we think we've lost

We love the idea that a phrase has a hidden, fuller, wiser version — that the everyday saying is only the surface, and that underneath it sits the real meaning everyone has forgotten. It's a satisfying thought. It makes us feel let in on something.

Sometimes it's even true. "Curiosity killed the cat" began life as "care killed the cat," where *care* meant worry rather than nosiness — a genuinely different meaning, four centuries ago, in the days of Ben Jonson. The reassuring tail people now add, "but satisfaction brought it back," is real enough, but it arrived much later. It isn't some lost original. The meaning simply moved over time, which is interesting on its own.

Push a little harder, though, and the fuller original starts to dissolve. "A jack of all trades, master of none" is often rescued with the flattering coda "but oftentimes better than a master of one" — except the historical record runs the other way. The phrase grew rather than shrank. "Jack of all trades" came first, and it was a criticism; "master of none" was bolted on later to sharpen the sting; and the generous ending has no solid early source at all. We didn't lose the flattering version. We may well have invented it.

And sometimes the "original" is pure fiction. You will have heard that "blood is thicker than water" actually means the opposite of how we use it — that the true, older line is "the blood of the covenant is thicker than the water of the womb," a hymn to chosen bonds over family ties. It's a lovely idea with nothing behind it. The phrase has meant the pull of family for centuries, and the covenant version appears to be a modern back-formation, traceable to a misquotation rather than to anything old. The same goes for "the customer is always right." The popular correction — that Harry Selfridge really said "in matters of taste" — was looked into by Snopes, who found no trace of him ever saying it, not in his own 1918 book, not anywhere.

Here is the uncomfortable part. From where the speaker is standing, the genuine lost half, the later addition and the pure invention all look exactly the same. Each one feels complete. Each one gets repeated with total confidence.

It happens to the experts, too

You might think this is a problem with folk wisdom — the stuff passed hand to hand in pubs and playgrounds, never written down, easy to garble. It isn't.

You have almost certainly been told, in some training room somewhere, that only 7% of communication is the words, and that the other 93% is tone and body language. It gets quoted at salespeople, teachers, leaders and negotiators as though it were a law of nature. It comes from Albert Mehrabian's research, published in 1967.

Here is what rarely gets quoted alongside it. Mehrabian's studies were narrow: small groups of participants, all of them women, looking specifically at how we read *feelings and attitudes* when the words and the tone contradict each other. That's it. It was never a finding about communication in general, and Mehrabian himself has spent years objecting to people stretching it that far. The number is real. The context that makes it true got stripped off somewhere between the journal and the training slide.

And the irony almost writes itself.

A finding about communication that fails, again and again, because its own most important caveat was never communicated.

When the missing half actually costs you

Back to that first aid room. The second question I will be asked tomorrow is about RICE — Rest, Ice, Compression, Elevation — the acronym almost everyone has met at some point as "the thing you do to an injury."

Ask most people what RICE is for and they will tell you it helps you heal. That is the fragment that travelled. What didn't travel is the situational part: when it helps, when it doesn't, and what it was ever meant to do.

The detail I find hard to argue with is this. Dr Gabe Mirkin, the physician who coined RICE in his 1978 *Sportsmedicine Book*, publicly walked it back in 2015. In his own words, after decades of coaches using his guideline, it now appeared that both ice and complete rest may *delay* healing rather than help it — because inflammation is part of how the body repairs itself, and suppressing it gets in the way. Ice still has its place for taking the edge off pain in the short term; Mirkin never said otherwise. But the flat belief that RICE is simply "what you do to heal" is exactly the oversimplified fragment that the man who invented it spent his later years trying to correct.

The acronym is neat, memorable, four tidy letters. The context — when, and when not — is none of those things. So the acronym travelled the world and the context stayed behind. And in a real incident, doing the wrong thing confidently because you only ever learned the tidy half is not a vocabulary quibble. It has a cost.

This is your organisation, not just your idioms

I'm not really writing about proverbs, or communication models, or sprains. I'm writing about what happens to knowledge as it moves from one person to the next — and nowhere does that matter more than inside an organisation.

Think about the phrases that live in your own team. The half-remembered "the way we do things here," repeated by people who never heard why it was decided in the first place. The unwritten rule everyone follows and no one can explain. The risk assessment whose real reasoning — the near miss, the judgement call, the specific thing that made someone write it — lives only in the head of a person who has since moved on. New people arrive and inherit the fragment. They fill the gaps with perfectly reasonable assumptions. And because everyone around them sounds sure, nobody thinks to check.

That is how a whole team ends up collectively, confidently wrong about what its own rules even mean.

Passing on the whole, not the half

None of this is an argument for longer policies or for killing off every useful shorthand. Shorthand is how busy people function. The point is narrower, and more practical than that:

- 1 Write down the *why*, not just the *what*.** A rule without its reasoning is a fragment waiting to be misread. It's the same argument as teaching the reasons, not just the one right way — the difference between people who comply and people who actually understand.
- 2 When you inherit a phrase, a policy or a protocol, ask what it is for — and when it doesn't apply — before you pass it on.** If you can't answer either, you are carrying a fragment.
- 3 Treat received wisdom that feels complete with a little suspicion.** The confident, tidy version is precisely the one most likely to have lost something on the way to you.
- 4 "Everyone knows" and "the original actually said" are not sources.** Check. It takes minutes, and it is the difference between wisdom and a well-dressed guess.
- 5 Make the caveat travel with the rule.** If the context genuinely matters, it has to be said every time the rule is said. A caveat that only ever lives in one person's head is protecting no one.

The words we leave unsaid don't disappear. They just stop being heard — and the person on the receiving end has no way of knowing there was ever anything more.

The trouble with the part that goes unsaid is that everyone assumes someone else already said it.

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