

# 6 phrases that will make you sound clueless at work

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In general, it's smart to say what you mean. In the workplace, people tend to use overwrought business jargon to compensate for not knowing their stuff. But there's a less-apparent risk to doing just the reverse. If you sound like a walking Instagram comment, you might start to alienate yourself in your own office and lose your coworkers' trust — even if they use those same kinds of words expressions when they're texting their roommates.

Some terms and phrases are best left to casual exchanges with friends and family. Here are a few you probably shouldn't let creep into your office vocabulary.

## 1. "No problem"

I know — what could possibly be wrong with this one? It's so innocuous, right? You're asked to photocopy a document or put together a meeting agenda. Easy enough. "No problem," you reply.

The expression comes up in all kinds of business environments, and the tone is often chipper and upbeat, so you don't give a second thought to using it periodically. Few people who hear "no problem" take it literally, but at a level just beneath consciousness awareness, it telegraphs an underhanded resentment. The speaker implies the possibility that somebody has created an issue that they're willing to let slide.

It's not the (nearly absurd) risk of a literal misinterpretation that you should guard against, though. It's the likelihood that you'll default to "no problem" when presented with tasks you consider menial—giving directions, taking minutes, photocopying, wrapping a package, or stepping out of someone's way in an elevator — and unconsciously show your annoyance with them (including nonverbally).

Chances are you won't say "no problem" when your supervisor asks you to prepare an important report or assigns you some other significant task. When a work duty carries more weight, you're more likely to ask smart questions about what it'll take to do it right, convey your enthusiasm, and declare that you're up to the task. But shouldn't you try to be seen as the person who approaches all your work that way? Scrap "no problem" — it isn't helping you show your best side. (And after all, it's a double negative.)

## 2. "Whatever"

Like "no problem," this word usually has a flippant tone to it, but that's not the main downside to using it. "Whatever" is often used to dismiss another person's idea. If I say, "Sure, whatever!" after somebody has offered a suggestion, I might think I'm just saying I don't mind one way or the other — kind of like, "doesn't matter to me, go for it!" But it won't always come across that supportively.

Instead, it might signal that I disagree but will go along with it anyway — maybe because I don't have the power or the initiative to convince my colleagues otherwise, or maybe just because I've got a martyr complex.

"Whatever" denotes resentful resignation, even if it doesn't sound that way to your own ears. Much the same is true of other tepid notes of assent, like "yeah," "yup," "sure," and "fine." Use these words with your friends, but not in professional settings where the stakes are fundamentally different.

## 3. "It is what it is"

Clichés like this make you sound like a lazy thinker. We default unthinkingly to empty expressions when we're trying to give the impression we have something to say but really don't, and also when we want to sound as though we're comfortable with something but might not be.

“Business is business,” “it is what it is,” and phrases like them aren’t just meaningless and repetitious — they sound like you don’t really care or that your brain just isn’t in gear. Good luck getting promoted that way.

#### 4. “Pissed off”

This expression is heard around the office more commonly than you might think, and even when the speaker is referring to how somebody else is feeling, it still reflects badly on them. Saying “I’m pissed off that I didn’t get that vacation time” makes you sound angry and uncooperative — that much is obvious.

But if you say “she was really pissed off after that meeting,” referring to your boss, you’re subtly expressing a criticism of her (even if you think she had every right to be furious!). Likewise, if you remark, “I think I pissed off Doug yesterday,” you’re basically confessing that you can’t get along with others (even if you think Doug was in the wrong!).

From just about every angle, this expression doesn’t work in your favor. Yes, people in your office — including you — are going to get upset from time to time. That much is natural. But how you speak about those breakdowns in collaboration should be more, well, collaborative. That goes for email, too, by the way.

#### 5. “Can’t”

To be fair, you can’t get away with never saying “can’t” — it’s just too common and useful a contraction — and I’m not suggesting you try. But it is smart to be on you guard for the contexts where you use it.

For example, you might innocently say at a meeting, “I can’t get that report to you until next Monday.” And fine, maybe you really can’t because it just isn’t feasible. But phrasing it like this makes you sound ineffective—like the person who disappoints. Why not flip it around and say what you can do instead? “I’ll have that report to you next Monday.” There — suddenly you’re somebody who delivers, and is helpfully realistic about timelines to boot.

Try to avoid “don’t” in similar situations. Rather than saying, “I don’t know what the solution is,” go with, “Let’s go over what some possible solutions might look like — I could really use some input.” Then you’ll sound bright and collegial.

#### 6. “Hope”

Here’s another perfectly innocuous word that can sound defeatist and passive (or even passive aggressive) around the office if you aren’t careful. In some contexts, it can make you sound less than confident. For example, if you say, “I hope we’ll meet our sales target,” you’re really planting the opposite idea — the possibility that you may not.

Obviously, that possibility is real and may even be one that you want to impress upon your team in order so they know what the stakes are. But then why not just say, “I really want us to meet our sales target, and I know we can get there”?

Similarly, “I hope our team can agree on a plan” sounds like you don’t exactly see how you’ll manage to. Instead, just say, “We expect to hammer out a plan” or “we’re committed to coming up with something everybody agrees on.” Even if you might not actually be confident that’ll happen, you should probably refrain from showing it.

No matter what, people invariably draw impressions of us based on the words we say. And by the very nature of language, those infinite shades of interpretation are impossible to control. But it’s still possible to avoid the expressions that may impart resentment, resignation, or a lack of commitment that you might not even actually feel.

Avoid these six words and phrases and you’ll start to sound just a little more collegial and confident. In the workplace especially, a little often goes a long way.

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