

What Your Boss Says... And What He Means

He may speak in a different language but the big man in the corner office is not from another planet. It's easy to decipher his code

:: Sunanda Poduwal

Boss, it's a four-letter word, and for some it is so in spirit. For the average corporate worker, all things boss-y are epitomised by the pointy-haired boss of Dilbert. Most of us relate to Dilbert's mental confusion and his frustration of working under a man who says one thing and means the opposite. It's all that reading between the lines that has given Dilbert that pinched look!

How does one understand those indecipherable messages from the boss? Is there a guide to boss-speak? You are not the only one who can't speak boss-ese, Ronesh Puri, managing director, Executive Access, an executive search firm says. "Most of the time emotional quotient is not a factor in promoting or selecting a person for a leadership position. What takes precedence, and rightfully so, are organisational and technical skills," he says, adding that 90% of the employees cannot handle negative feedback. "The result is confused communication," he concludes.

Sometimes, insecure bosses withhold honest feedback for the fear of coming across as the bad guy. But a leader needs to be a coherent communicator. "Sugar-coating a bitter pill is just a short-term plan. But that doesn't mean you are demeaning and condescending in the garb of being truthful. The balance is critical but not unachievable," says Vineet Kaul, chief people officer, Hindalco Industries.

This balance can be achieved only if a leader is able to build a strong foundation of trust among the employees. However, it's a two-way road. "Just like it's the manager's responsibility to give feedback, the employee should seek it as well. Both the parties have to strive towards effective communication," says Meenal Jadhav, principal with the leadership consulting division of Heidrich and Struggles. But here's a primer on how to decipher the words coming out of your boss' mouth.

1 Boss Says: I can understand. I don't have a problem but it's a company policy.

Meaning: I actually have a problem. You better pull up your socks.

The spiel was given to advertising executive Deepak Malhotra by his boss when he asked for another promotion, a year after his first one. But last year, a junior was again promoted a year after his first. "The company policy remark was just a pretext to reject my demand," Malhotra says.

What to do: The boss wants you to put in extra effort. Stop feeling short-changed and put in your best.



2 Boss Says: There are potholes everywhere but we still have to cross the road.

Meaning: Don't crib! Just do your work!

No one likes to work late into the night. And surely not when the weekend is round the corner. To prep you for the long night ahead, the boss may give a carefully worded speech peppered with metaphors like 'crossing a turbulent sea to the beautiful island across'. Obviously you respond to this with a lot of ranting hoping that he will not ask you next.

What to do: Stop cribbing, as the boss might eventually lose his cool and the metaphors.

3 Boss Speak: Be more committed and focused.

Meaning: Work for 12-14 hours a day, consider Saturdays as career development days and on Sundays chill out with your BB and iPad.

Everyone loves the workhorse, except fellow employees. If you encounter this workplace wildlife in your company, you will know they are the boss' blue-eyed babies. Asking the top man for pointers on how to improve (read, be the model employee) will have you at the receiving end of the focused/committed speech.

What to do: Impress the boss by putting in

more effort within normal working hours. Working smart trumps working hard.

4 Boss Speak: Keep it brief and get to the point.

Meaning: I have other things to do. For heaven's sake, spare me the details.

"My boss' emails were always one-liners. Five minutes into a discussion, he would appear distracted," says Rachit Anand, currently working with an HR consulting firm, about his boss in his previous company.

What to do: Keep your official communications – on email, phone or face-to-face – precise, concise and direct.

5 Boss Says: You need to be more performance oriented.

Meaning: Your work just doesn't match my expectations. Only a few of us have the misfortune of encountering a terror boss.

He/she is the rude, crude, bully boss who is never satisfied with your work, goes out of the way to show it to you and looks for opportunities to humiliate you, publicly and otherwise. This type of boss doesn't mince words except when they ask you to be "performance oriented" meaning he/she is not happy with you.

What to do: Pull up your socks. But if that doesn't seem to help, start looking

out. There's only as much you can do to please a nasty boss.

6 Boss Says: Well Done. Very good job!

Meaning: There's a lot more coming your way, buddy.

Let us tell you a truth about the boss being: they are impressed by good work. In her very first assignment with an NGO, Ina Goel managed to earn the boss' favour with her comprehensive report of a project in the North East. And the next few months she was inundated with work. "The more projects I got, I swelled with pride. But after six months, I was exhausted," she says.

What to do: Good work may get more work but it's also rewarded equally. Don't slacken up.

7 Boss Says: I would like you to...

Meaning: This is an imperative executive order. OBEY!

A straight-forward boss is a myth. Most bosses like to prefix instructions with an "I'd like you to". Don't think you are being given a choice, it's just a 'polite' order.

What to do: Sense the tone. A polite way of delegating work keeps the communication easy. Would you rather have a boss who barks orders? We think not.