

3 dumb things managers should never say

These mystifying utterances can perplex and even daunt your associates. Have you heard them? Worse, have you spoken them?

By Dianna Booher | Posted: May 5, 2014

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"Don't take this personally."

"Don't bring me a problem unless you bring me an answer."

"We need to talk about that sometime."

If you've ever uttered any or all of these comments, reconsider:

1. "Don't take this personally."

How else should you take a comment like that, delivered before a critique of your work? After all, who else did the work but you?

If a group, team, or entire department is responsible and deserves the critique, then the boss should be talking to all of them, right? If the comment is delivered to you personally, why would the speaker contradict himself and tell you not to pay attention to it?

Is the leader asking you to listen on behalf of someone else?

If so, should you respond on behalf of that other person? Or should you not respond at all and just relay the message?

2. "Don't bring me a problem unless you bring me an answer."

If you had the answers, it wouldn't be a problem, now would it?

Let's give leaders the benefit of the doubt on this odd statement. With this comment they probably mean: *"Don't dump your problems at my door and expect me to solve them for you. Think for yourself."*

The unintended consequences of such comments produce the "surprises" that many leaders dread: stalled projects, delayed decisions, and buried disasters that unfold too late to salvage.

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3. "We need to talk about that sometime."

This put-off may be the most puzzling statement of all.

Kimberly lingers after a staff meeting until the room empties, and then says to her boss: *"In my opinion we still need to readjust the workflow in my area. I have three employees putting in 12-hour days and two employees with only enough work for about a five-hour day. Did you get my email on that a couple of weeks ago with my suggestions for adjusting their job responsibilities?"*

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The boss says, "Yes, I did. We need to talk about that."

Long pause.

Kimberly says, "So what do you think?"

"We need to talk about that sometime," the boss says, as he heads on down the hallway.

Kimberly is talking about that. And has written about that. And has left a voice mail message about that. The we-need-to-talk-about-that stall shuts down communication like a slammed gate. One person is talking; the leader isn't listening.

If such pronouncements start to roll off your tongue, you may want to give it more thought.

What other common but unhelpful comments come to mind?

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Russell Hoyle · 35 weeks ago

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I think you should revise this as "Dumb things BAD managers say." All three are more a matter of communications, professionalism, and tact in the workplace. And as a manager I absolutely hate being ambushed in a hallway or in a conference room after a scheduled meeting for ad-hoc discussions on any important topic (your third example and "Kimberly"). Perhaps you could suggest the manager respond with, "Thank you for bringing this to my attention, Kimberly (and yes, I do remember your email). I would like to discuss this important issue with you in depth. Please look at my calendar and set up a meeting where you can show me your proposal and we can talk about this in depth."

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Robert Solomon · 35 weeks ago

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I don't think it's at all dumb to ask your staffers to bring a solution, or a number of possible solutions, to a discussion about a problem. Managers should expect staffers to take ownership of an issue, especially if it is one of their own making. The last thing any leader would want is a staffer saying, "I screwed up; can you make this go away?"

What IS dumb is creating a climate of fear, where staffers are afraid to surface issues. In the firms I worked at, we had a culture of, "early and often." You didn't hide from problems, you confronted them, as soon as they occurred and as often as they occurred.

The only thing that would cause ire among senior management is hiding the reality of a bad situation. This we little patience for, given that a small problem unaddressed would quickly escalate into a big problem even more challenging to solve, which was in nobody's interest.

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Markham Howe · 35 weeks ago

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I agree with Robert that employees should always bring proposed solutions to problems. The more solutions presented the better the decision will be. Twice in my management career I had an employee who was expert in finding problems, but could never identify a solution. Neither of them ever got promoted, because they couldn't solve problems.

In my military career, I told my unit commanders that each time they brought me a problem to also bring me at least three proposed solutions to the problem (all of which must work) with one of those solutions being his or her preferred solution. By doing they would get their preferred solution 80 percent of the time. If they didn't bring me their proposed solution they would my way 100 percent of the time. My door was always open to them for discussion and decision making, but they quickly learned that all decision making