

5 workplace politeness hacks



People have different business styles, and these are influenced by personality, language and culture. In English, when we want to sound more polite, we often use less direct or softer language. Below are 5 techniques:

1. **Modals**
2. **Downgraders**
3. **Limiting phrases**
4. **Positive adjectives**
5. **Softeners**

Modals: would, could, might, may

In the examples below, the message is the same but the wording sounds softer.

- This **wouldn't** be possible for us. (vs That isn't possible for us.)
- That **might** be an unpopular strategy. (vs That is an unpopular strategy.)

We also use modals to ask questions and make requests.

- **Could you** complete the report by the end of next week?

- **Would you be able to** call me back today?

Downgraders: slight, a little, rather, a few, a to a certain extent

Downgraders lessen the impact of the word or sentence they are attached to.

- I'm **a little** concerned about that idea.
- We're running **a bit** behind schedule.
- I see it differently **to a certain extent**. (=partly but not completely)

Limiting phrases: so far, at this time, currently, on this occasion

These are phrases that are used to say something isn't possible right now, but give the suggestion that they may be possible later (even if they aren't really).

- **On this occasion**, we're going with another provider.
- **Currently**, we aren't able to help you.
- We haven't found a solution **so far**.

Positive adjectives for negative messages

This can be helpful when you want to deliver negative feedback or complain. Use **not + adverb (totally, fully, entirely, very) + positive adjective** to create the indirect approach.

- Direct: We are unsatisfied with the work you've done.
- Indirect: We aren't **totally satisfied** with the work you've done.
- Direct: I'm unconvinced by this idea.
- Indirect: I'm **not entirely convinced** by this idea.
- Direct: You seem uncommitted to this job.
- Indirect: You **don't** seem **fully committed** to this job.

Softeners: I'm afraid, unfortunately, to be honest

These words at the start of sentence indicate you are going to give bad news.

- **I'm afraid** I can't make it to the meeting today.
- **Unfortunately**, that product isn't available.
- **To be honest**, I don't think that strategy will work. (use this phrase when you're about to say something you think may not be welcome)



Turn these sentences into more polite or less direct statements using the prompts in brackets.

1. That was an unpopular decision. (not entirely + adjective)
2. This is going to cause disruption. (would)
3. We can't give you a completion date for the project. (unfortunately, at the moment)
4. We're going to run over budget. (a little)
5. The team doesn't support that idea. (might)
6. Call me back soon. (would)
7. The team is overworked. We don't have the resources. (to be honest, a little, currently)
8. You aren't being promoted. (I'm afraid, on this occasion)
9. That idea won't work. (to be honest, not totally + adjective, would)
10. We're unable to accept you're your proposal. (I'm afraid, at this time)

You can check your answers at the bottom of the page .

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Answers

1. That was not an entirely popular decision.
2. This would cause disruption.
3. Unfortunately, we can't give you a completion date for the project at the moment.
4. We're going to run a little over budget.
5. The team might not support that idea.
6. Would you be able to call me back soon?
7. To be honest, the team is a little overworked. Currently, we don't have the resources.
8. I'm afraid, you aren't being promoted on this occasion.
9. To be honest, I'm not totally sure / convinced that idea would work.
10. I'm afraid, we're unable to accept your proposal at this time.



Hello! I am an English native speaker from London who has lived in Ukraine and worked exclusively with Ukrainian adult learners for the past 5 years. I've worked for large global companies and also ran my own business for 15 years. I've helped hundreds of students to feel more confident communicating at work and progress in their careers. Get in touch about my business courses if your English level is :

- limiting your job opportunities
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