

The 4 Most Common Passive Aggressive Phrases People Use At Work

Are you guilty of saying this in an email or to a coworker?

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How would you feel about saying phrases like "I need help with this project" or "I deserve a promotion" to a colleague or boss?

If you're like most people, these are pretty scary sentences to say in a workplace. Maybe it's because you're conscious of power structure, or perhaps you have the desire to look like you're on top of your tasks. However, instead of being direct about frustration or needs, workers often opt for passive-aggressive statements, such as "I can't imagine having time for a lunch break" or "it's not like I have enough work to do already."

While it can be intimidating to be straightforward — whether that's flat-out asking about progress updates at work or inquiring intentionally about a promotion you've been waiting for — it's important. Being passive-aggressive only makes work less enjoyable and creates more problems for both staff and higher-ups.

Plus, it's a rude way to interact with others.

"In the etiquette world, being passive-aggressive may seem polite on the surface, but it's still rude," Nick Leighton, an etiquette expert and host of the "Were You Raised by Wolves?" podcast, told HuffPost via email.

"While it may seem like it'll help avoid confrontation, it often just comes across as judgmental or insincere," he added.

Think about it: Telling someone you wish you could log off on time or questioning whether they saw an email only makes it seem like they're doing something wrong.

"It's conflict avoidance at its highest," said Hallie Kritsas, a licensed mental health counselor with Thriveworks in Jacksonville, Florida.

When you aren't willing to address a potential conflict head-on, it can lead to confusion. How can someone know you need help with your workload if you don't actually say it?

"Being passive-aggressive can lead to misunderstandings or miscommunications. It's far more polite to simply be direct," Leighton added.

There are four key phrases that experts told HuffPost are prime examples of passive aggression in an office, and you've probably used at least one of these. Here's what they are and what to say instead:

1. 'Per my last email.'

"'Per my last email' is often interpreted as passive aggressive because it can convey irritation," Leighton said. The person receiving the email may read this sentence as "'um, did you even read my last email? I already explained everything clearly. Pay attention and get it together!'"

He added, "It can seek to assign blame when it's more efficient (and more polite) to just move on and try to actually solve the problem."

Instead of a phrase like "per my last email," Leighton suggests phrases like "I wanted to follow-up on the note I sent last week" or "I'm checking in to see if you've had a chance to look at _____."

2. 'Not sure you saw my last message.'

According to both Kritsas and Leighton, this phrase is another commonly used passive-aggressive sentence in the workplace.

"On the user end, when we're getting some of these 'not sure if you saw my last message or email' type things, that person could feel scolded or ashamed or may be feeling dismissed and not really feeling supported," Kritsas said.

This is, clearly, not a good thing in a workplace, she added. Moreover, it may put the person on the receiving end of the message into a bad headspace, Kritsas said.

"Were they really irritated? Did they just mean 'just circling back' as more of a positive, colloquial type thing?" Kritsas added. "And I think that's the harmful part about it. In a nutshell, if the passive aggressive tone is there, it can completely be misconstrued or missed."

Instead, you can use a phrase like "I wanted to follow up on the note I sent last week," said Leighton.

3. 'Just circling back.'

"Given the situation or whatever the email was about, [just circling back] could be super friendly, but it could also come across as someone being irritated, and it could sound kind of condescending," Kritsas said.

"Just circling back" is a passive aggressive way of acknowledging a deadline or a need.

Instead of using this passive aggressive sentence, try something like "I'm checking in to see if you've had a chance to look at _____," Leighton said.

4. 'Please advise.'

Throwing the two-word "please advise" in an email, or even into a conversation during a meeting, is anything but ideal.

While the use of the word "please" may make this sound direct and polite, it's actually passive-aggressive, according to Kritsas, who added that she'd take this phrase as a sign that someone is irritated.

"It wouldn't naturally be somebody that I would want to converse with or to have a happy relationship with," Kritsas said.

Being straightforward is better for both communication and etiquette.

Being passive-aggressive can leave both parties very frustrated, Kritsas explained. It can cause confusion regarding the request, making the recipient spiral about the meaning of a message and result in unmet needs for the person who is saying the passive-aggressive thing.

Additionally, it's a rude way of interacting with another person, whether that's at work or somewhere else.

"All etiquette is local, so what might be appropriate in Paris, France, is going to be different from Paris, Texas," Leighton said. "And in most workplaces, there are people from all sorts of different backgrounds, so there's even more reason to just be clear when communicating with coworkers."

If you want to incorporate politeness with a straightforward request, Kritsas recommended what's commonly known as a "compliment sandwich." With this, you start and end your thought with a compliment and put the request or feedback in the middle.

To follow the compliment sandwich formula, you could say something like: "You are doing great work on that big report, but are you able to take a look at the draft I sent over yesterday? Thanks again for all of your hard work this week — I know you have been so busy."

Kritsas said, "It's a great way to be relational, which I think should be a thing that we use at work, because you're a work family and you should be getting along and being polite to people." But it still conveys the message (or necessary task) while being affirming and acknowledging that emails get missed or report deadlines pass, she added.

Avoiding passive-aggressive behavior is a good way to have your needs met, communicate clearly with others, and foster better relationships with those around

you. While it may feel tough in the moment to be direct, it is only better for your job (and self) in the long run.