Breaking the boss's code words

To understand what your boss means—and expects—use this handy list to decode some common phrases he or she likely uses:

"The timing is bad." It means that the boss isn't ready to consider your idea at the moment. If you are invested in the idea, clarify that timing is actually the problem, and not that your boss simply doesn't want to entertain your idea. Ask: "When would be a good time to consider it?" or "What would have to happen for us to consider it?" Your boss will either commit to revisiting it down the road, or park it indefinitely.

"I trust you to make the right decision." This expresses a vote of confidence in your abilities—and insinuates that you need to take more responsibility and make decisions on your own. It's time to take ownership of your work, performance and goals.

"I need you to be a team player." Cooperation and collaboration are critical on a team. If your boss says this, chances are he or she doesn't believe you are pulling your own weight, going the extra mile, or putting the interest of the team or organization first. If the boss's expectations are reasonable, and he or she is not asking you to do something unethical or immoral, you likely need to put in more effort.

"You know what's at stake." Your boss is asking you to do your very best work and not make him or her, the team, or the organization look bad. It's very likely, your boss is being pressured by upper management, and he or she is relying on you to impress some people.

"We can't sell this upstairs." This may be a bit of a cop-out on your boss's part, who isn't convinced that your idea is good enough, but doesn't have the guts to shoot it down. Again, if you believe in the idea, ask what it would take to convince upper management of its merits.

— Adapted from "13 Mysterious Code Words Your Boss Uses—and What They Really Mean," Shana Lebowitz, www.thriveglobal.com.