

Is Swearing at Work Okay? The complicated impact of profanity in a professional setting

Whenever you're having a tough day at work, it's normal for some four-letter words to come to mind. Yet, offensive language is still primarily seen as taboo in workplace culture, particularly in front of customers, managers, and executives.

It's more common for foul language to fly discretely between coworkers, which is typically accepted as long as no one is directly offended or insulted by the bad language.

However, even this can be risky, as you can expect a call from human resources and some disciplinary action to be taken if you get caught using expletives around the office (mainly if your language is offensive to someone's race, gender, or culture).

Traditional business etiquette dictates that dirty words have no place in a professional setting.

But is that always true? Or are there circumstances where swearing at work can be beneficial?

It turns out there's some surprising evidence that suggests bad words can strengthen a sense of camaraderie, motivate employees, and act as a cathartic release to cope with stress.

That's why I decided to put this article together exploring the use of swear words in professional environments, so read on to learn more about how having a potty mouth at work isn't necessarily always a bad thing.

Curse Words and Employment Law: Profanity Policies

If you aren't a fan of swearing at work, it may seem tempting to put an anti-profanity policy in place at your organization, but it's not recommended.

Why is that?

It's because it would be too difficult to pinpoint an exact list of words that everyone agrees are offensive. Different cultures and communities use different obscenities, so it would be next to impossible to enact such a policy.

Instead of creating an anti-profanity policy outright, it's best to form policies around respecting coworkers.

That will allow you to examine instances of foul language on a case-by-case basis, granting you the flexibility you need to make practical judgments.

Under such a policy, HR would only take disciplinary action if a coworker was directly insulted, offended, or harassed by another employee's swearing. That would create a hostile work environment for the worker in question, which warrants disciplinary measures.

Can Swearing at Work Be Okay Sometimes?

According to business etiquette aficionado [Diane Gottsman](#), the Protocol School of Texas founder, the use of profanity at work is always unacceptable.

To her, they simply aren't necessary and only serve to cheapen interactions. She cites the 1981 film *Mommie Dearest*, where actress Faye Dunaway unleashes a profanity-laced rant aimed at a boardroom full of men. To Gottsman, it's a brave move, but she feels it would have been equally as effective without the profanity.

Gottsman's take is valid, and it's undoubtedly shared by a majority of companies, institutions, and organizations worldwide.

But is that all there is to the argument?

Not by any means!

Timothy Jay, a psychology professor at the Massachusetts College of Liberal Arts, has a far different take on the matter.

His opinion is that no other words in the English language are as hard-hitting, attention-grabbing, or impactful as swear words. To Jay, cussing grants you the freedom to convey raw emotions more effectively.

As an example, he cites an angry Tweet from the Philippine Foreign Minister, Teodoro Locsin, where he dropped an f-bomb aimed at the Chinese government. It was a bold statement that sent ripples worldwide — one that would have been far less punchy or attention-grabbing without the expletive.

While not always the politically correct thing to say, curse words do elicit a sense of urgency that other words simply can't. In a desperate situation like the Philippines was in, posting carefully-crafted platitudes wouldn't have attracted any attention.

In that scenario, it's better to go out with a bang than a whimper, and an f-bomb can provide an impressive blast radius.

The Science Behind Swearing

Timothy Jay's point about swearing being more impactful actually has some scientific evidence backing it up.

In particular, a [2020 study in the UK](#) found that using profanity can alleviate pain, providing a tangible physical benefit.

In the study, participants that let the expletives fly experienced an increased pain threshold and tolerance by a third.

So the next time you hit your thumb with a hammer, don't hesitate to scream the f-word, as it'll make you feel better!

It's not just physical pain that swearing helps alleviate, either.

[Other studies](#) have found that swearers can also cope with emotional pain by using profanity.

For these reasons, it can be beneficial to have a more lax policy surrounding using curse words at work behind closed doors. Being able to vent to a coworker about a tough day in private while slipping in a swear word or two can go a long way toward helping them relieve stress and make it easier for them to calm down and focus

on work again.

The science doesn't end there, though. Studies have also found that swearing can boost your strength. In one [experiment](#), participants exhibited greater handgrip strength whenever they were allowed to curse during the test.

How Swearing at Work Makes You Appear

Before you start peppering the f-word into your daily speak at work, you should consider how that will reflect on you professionally.

In this regard, it's crucial to approach swearing at work with a lot of discretion.



Your coworkers likely won't appreciate excessive cursing, especially if it makes it harder to decipher what you're trying to say.

Behind closed doors and among close coworkers, swearing can elicit a sense of camaraderie. As stated before, it lessens the impact of emotional and physical pain, which can be pretty cathartic for employees on the job.

Trading a few expletives in the break room while discussing a football game or a demanding client shouldn't cause too much concern.

Yet, it's crucial to consider who's around you when engaging in profanity. As a rule of thumb, avoid using harmful words that address race or gender to avoid offending anyone.

Traditionally, the belief was that profanity cheapens your language and will make people not trust you.

However, recent evidence has come to light that suggests the opposite. This [multi-national study](#) found that those who swear are perceived as more trustworthy than those who don't. It's also viewed as a sign of integrity, which may be surprising to some.

In some cases, cursing can help you blend in with a group and become more accepted. For instance, if you start working with a crew that frequently uses particular swear words, incorporating them into your language can help form a bond.

It shows that you want to truly connect with them instead of keeping them at arm's length with politically correct business speak.

Swearing is also a sign of high emotional intelligence and a robust vocabulary, which is also contrary to popular belief.

Swearing at Work: Curse at Your Own Risk

Considering everything we've gone over, there are instances where it's acceptable to curse at work, but you should approach it with caution.

While today's younger workforce likely won't be offended by some casual swearing, it's still an act that's generally frowned upon by the majority.

For this reason, the benefits of swearing (conveying urgency, cathartic release) can be sullied by an offended coworker or customer, which is why it's still best to watch your language.

It's best to view swearing at work as a last resort rather than the status quo to stay safe rather than sorry.

In other words, stay professional 99% of the time - but don't be afraid to drop an f-bomb if your team needs some serious motivation to save the business. The same is true if one of your coworkers is having a hard day and needs to vent.

As long as you're careful with your language, you shouldn't get into trouble uttering the occasional curse word while on the clock.

When in doubt, wait for your boss to curse first. Even then, don't feel as if you HAVE to curse. It's essential to speak your mind, but that doesn't mean you have to give in to peer pressure. If you're more comfortable not using swear words, you never have to use them if you don't want to.

Concluding Thoughts: Swearing at Work

By now, you should have a better understanding of when it's okay to swear at work and the science behind cursing.

Surprisingly, cursing has tangible physical and emotional benefits - such as coping with physical and emotional pain.

While it's not acceptable to go on long profanity-filled rants at the office, using an occasional swear word behind closed doors isn't the end of the world. As long as you're discrete and use your better judgment, relieving some stress by swearing can be just what the doctor ordered.