

The BS Dictionary

Uncovering the Origins
and True Meanings
of Business Speak

BOB WILTFONG
TIM ITO



More Praise for *The BS Dictionary*

“When I worked with Bob Wiltfong at *The Daily Show* it was clear he was full of BS. I’m glad to see he’s found an outlet for it.”

—Stewart Bailey, Former Co-Executive Producer,
The Daily Show with Jon Stewart

“This is the book I wish I had written.”

—Tripp Crosby (of Tripp & Tyler), Entertainers and Creators
of “A Conference Call in Real Life”

“As a corporate executive, I thought I understood all the business jargon known to (wo)man. But no BS, this dictionary has shown me I’ve only scratched the surface. I’m now on a mission to *push the envelope* and *circle back* to this hilarious, sometimes cringe-inducing book again and again whenever I need a *magic bullet* for corporate translation.”

—Christine Walters, Television Development Executive

“Page-turner is not a word I would normally associate with a dictionary, but this book is just that. It is filled with one delicious entry after another, giving insight into some of the most commonly used business words and phrases in today’s corporate world. At Four Day Weekend, we have taught thousands of business leaders the power of ‘yes, and’ at their jobs. I say ‘yes, and’ to another volume of *The BS Dictionary!*”

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“I referred to Bob Wiltfong’s *Daily Show* field pieces to learn how to do the job. I’m glad he wrote a book I can use to finally figure out what the hell everyone in the office is saying.”

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The Daily Show with Trevor Noah

“*The BS Dictionary* is a cross between an old school dictionary and an Urban Dictionary, with a huge dose of biting personality. This book is hilarious and addictive.”

—Bob Kulhan, Founder and CEO, Business Improv

“This is fantastic book not only clearly defines many of the business words and phrases in the corporate world, but it also gives the origin of each phrase in a very fun and informative way. I can’t think of a better way to learn (and laugh about) the foreign language that is today’s business speak.”

—Kathleen O’Connor, Professor, London Business School, Visiting Associate Professor, Cornell Johnson Graduate School of Management

“In addition to being an actually helpful resource, *The BS Dictionary* is also a joke book, a history lesson and a trivia fan’s delight. If you love to learn and laugh, you’ll agree it gets on the green.”

—Jane Borden, Journalist
Author, *I Totally Meant to Do That*

“One thing I know about Bob Wiltfong—he’s a funny guy. And that’s no BS! If anyone can make ‘business humor’ more than an oxymoron, it’s him. This book should be required reading for anyone who thinks an occasional laugh is a good way to cope with the corporate world. I’ll force all my employees to keep a copy on their desk. Or is that pushing the envelope?”

—Pat Dolan, Owner, *Newsday*

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Bob

*To my wife, Jill: You are my unicorn, my rock star,
my GOAT. In a nutshell, I love you!*

*To my kids: If you ever feel like you're in the weeds and life has left you holding the
bag, know that we are all attending a series of lunch & learns on this Earth and
that Mom-and-Pop love you to the ends of the universe.*

Tim

To my mom and dad, the two best people I know.

To my wife, Julie, and sons, Alex and Eric: You give me joy every day.

To the town and people of Lakewood, Ohio: You are where you come from.

And I'm proud to say I come from there.

Lastly, to my friends: Thank you for always being there.

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PREFACE

Dear Reader,

We're going to take off our kid gloves and be aboveboard with you. At the end of the day, most of us have to work 24/7 to survive. We could give you the blow-by-blow on why that is, but that's like putting lipstick on a pig, yes? Why boil the ocean to find the reasons? It is what it is.

As such, we believe it's important to disambiguate the common phrases of our jobs and to open the kimono on idioms and clichés that stretch our bandwidth of understanding and make us wonder if our careers are scalable. Plainly put, how we communicate in our jobs is where the rubber meets the road for our future and can determine whether we can establish the mind-share necessary to move the needle. Trust us, as professionals who are long in the tooth in the world of corporate training and marketing, this is not our first rodeo!

We've gone beyond the low-hanging fruit of just giving you parts of speech and red-flagging definitions. For all intents and purposes, that's table stakes here. Look, we went against the grain by giving you what we think each word or phrase really means when used in the business world. Some thought leaders might suggest these "BS definitions" aren't worth their salt and are just a white elephant meant to increase SEO for the book. We realize the BS definitions certainly represent a thinking-outside-the-box approach to a standard dictionary, and we had a SWOT team of editors throwing shade at us for doing them. However, we stuck to our guns and put our John Hancocks on these Easter egg definitions, if you will, because we think the sweat equity results in great deliverables and a USP for a client-facing book such as this. The net-net is a win-win for you and for us.

That is why we wrote this game-changing book: to give you cut-and-dry definitions of some of the most cookie-cutter words and phrases used in today's business environments. Hence, what follows is a deep dive into what these words really mean. The upshot of this 360-degree approach is making you the master of the universe with the new normal of communication in the business world! Kudos to you for leaning in to this content!

—Bob and Tim

P.S. Seriously, we hope you enjoy this book. We had a great time discovering the origins of these words and phrases, and writing the definitions for what businesspeople are really thinking when they say them! We hope it provides useful insight into how we speak to one another on the job, and the way communication has evolved over time through various influences. The reality is there wouldn't be business without business speak, but we hope this book will inspire us all to be more original and use just a little less of it when communicating our thoughts on the job.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Writing a book like this obviously takes a tremendous amount of research, and many sources have played an integral part of bringing these pages to life. In particular, the Internet has a vast amount of information—some of it verifiable and correct, some of it misleading, and some of it specious at best, but always a good lead for what people believe about word origins. What is true is that we relied on Internet sources to start our research, and where possible, found other valid resources to back up any claims we found online. With that said, any factual errors you see in these pages are ours alone at this point.

The following sources proved invaluable in our research:

- The *Oxford English Dictionary* (*OED*). Called the “definitive record of the English language,” it is indeed a great resource for many of the first documented uses of words and phrases.
- *The Field Guide to Sports Metaphors* by Josh Chetwynd. This book is essential for all of you interested in the influence that sports has had on our language. Josh is a friend and a great guy. So please read his work.
- Google’s Ngram Viewer (<https://books.google.com/ngrams>). The ability to look up books and see manuscripts from the 1500s is frankly amazing, and provided a whole new window into the origin and age of some terms, many of which hadn’t been documented before.
- Websites
 - The Phrase Finder (www.phrases.org.uk); this is a terrific site we used to find some original citations and as a starting point for learning more about the terms
 - Online Etymology Dictionary (www.etymonline.com)
 - The Word Detective (www.word-detective.com)

- Wikipedia; it's not only a wealth of information, but also a great reality check on competing sources
- Dictionary.com
- Thesaurus.com
- *Merriam-Webster Dictionary* (M-W.com)
- There are too many other books, message boards, and websites to mention that at least helped provide a starting point for what others have found.

We also couldn't have done this without the expert guidance of key individuals at the Association for Talent Development, including our remarkable editors, Kathryn Stafford and Melissa Jones; our marketing guru, Kay Hechler; our book's honcho, Justin Brusino; and our all-around management-communications Sherpa, Ryan Changcoco.

Bob would also like to thank his agent, Duvall Osteen at Aragi, for believing in him and this project from day one. Duvall, you are the best! In addition, a huge thank you to Zack Stovall, whose animations supplemented an earlier version of this material. Zack, your drawings may not exist in the finished product, but know that your spirit is in these pages. Finally, Tim Ito, without your work and vision this book would simply not exist. Bob thanks you for your guidance and help. It is an honor to have you as a co-author.

In closing, we'd like to thank our wives and children, who have indulged us (particularly as we've waxed poetic about the origin of this or that term). We wouldn't be the cutting-edge, rubber-meets-the-road kind of guys we are without you.

There are almost 300 entries in this book. Want to help us pass that milestone? Drop us a line at info@thebsdictionary.com, and we'll try to include your suggestion in the second edition.

—Bob Wiltfong and Tim Ito, April 2020

INTRODUCTION

The idea for this book started one day at my home, when the woman who I thought was my wife turned into someone I did not recognize. Jill is a very smart and accomplished businesswoman. On this fateful day, she was about to jump on a conference call with colleagues. I had just finished talking to her about something (I forget what), and we'd had crystal-clear communication, both sides understanding every word, every idea. This is a woman I've known for more than 25 years. We “get” each other. We're simpatico.

Then the business call started.

Jill began using words that I had never heard come out of her mouth before. Things like *straw man*, *table stakes*, and *SEO*. To make matters worse, she was using the words with confidence, and amazingly, her co-workers were throwing other foreign-sounding phrases—*Internet of Things*, *blockchain*, *pivot*—right back at her with total understanding. It was almost like discovering that your spouse is a spy after being married to the person for years and never suspecting. I envisioned confronting her after she hung up: “Who are you, woman?! I want answers now. No more lies!”

Where in the heck did Jill learn all these words, and why did they make sense to her and her co-workers, but no sense to me? They were part of a foreign language that I did not know how to speak (and was afraid to admit I didn't).

That's when I started researching the terms that you'll find in the following pages. I didn't intend to write a book. I just wanted to learn more. It was only after I was introduced to the phrase *the tallest midget* at one of my consulting gigs that I started to think, “There should be a dictionary devoted to this stuff.”

Business has always had its own language, with legions of speakers across generations and continents, but its dictionaries have been few. While that might not seem like a pressing problem, there are larger issues here that need to be explored.

First, business speak (BS for short . . . pun intended) changes quickly. “Our technology spreads things fast,” says Angela Noble-Grange, senior lecturer of management communication at the Cornell SC Johnson College of Business, “and it kills things fast, so something that’s cool today might have a life of a week, and then it’s gone.” That means you’re not alone if you’ve found yourself in a business meeting wondering what that word or phrase everyone else is using means (but are afraid to say you don’t know it).

When my co-author, Tim Ito, was working as a researcher at *U.S. News & World Report*, a seasoned reporter turned in his work and then announced he would be “out of pocket” for the next few days. Tim had never heard that phrase before and was confused by what it meant. From the context, he knew it was something important, but did it mean the reporter was broke? Maybe he didn’t have any clean clothes? A colleague finally cleared up his confusion (see *out-of-pocket* in these pages for a full definition).

Further evidence of the problem presented itself to a friend of mine who’s been working for 30 years in journalism and real estate. She told me she didn’t know what B2B stood for when she first heard it. Concerned about showing her ignorance, she muddled through the first few times it came up in conversation, and then privately googled the phrase to figure it out.

This book addresses that problem by giving you the latest, up-to-date definitions of some of the most well-known BS terms in the English language. You don’t have to be a recent business school grad, or a foreign traveler trying to parse the crazy things we English speakers say while doing business, to get something out of it. We’re sure even the most experienced, English-speaking businessperson will find a few surprise meanings and origins in these pages.

Speaking of origin, there’s a famous saying that “history is written by the victors.”¹ In the case of word origins and what the public believes, the same is perhaps true if you add “of search engine optimization” at the end. Certainly, one natural place to begin understanding the origin of terms is the Internet, given the voluminous amount of data and information it contains. But what comes up on the first page of Google results—because let’s face it, no one reads page 2—can be a red herring (see page 194) in many ways. There are message boards with different people of varying

expertise weighing in. There are websites for which someone has perhaps written a very authoritative-seeming blog post. There are brand-name websites (such as the History Channel and Merriam-Webster) that also give their take. There's the work of the late William Safire, the renowned *New York Times* writer on language; Ben Zimmer, who writes the *Wall Street Journal* column on language; Anne Curzan, of the University of Michigan; and other highly cited etymologists.

At times (well, perhaps more often than not), websites copy one another's sources—even reputable sites will take a shortcut and point to the first source that came up in search results. Sometimes that source is correct; other times, it's one that merely espouses great conspiracy theories.

Add to this the difficulty that comes from someone just saying a term versus it being documented in history. We have several examples where that appears to be the case—*push the envelope*, for example, seems to originate from American pilots who worked on the Mercury space program in the late 1950s and early 1960s, but it seemingly wasn't documented on paper until Tom Wolfe's book *The Right Stuff*, published in 1979.

In other cases, the origin is buried deep in the bowels of the Internet because some sources don't rise to the level of Google's algorithm. Take *lunch & learn* for example. If you do a search for "What's the origin of 'lunch & learn?'" or "Who coined the term 'lunch & learn?'" as we did, you won't find an answer—at least within the first 10 pages. We then looked at the *Oxford English Dictionary* (the *OED*, known as "the definitive record of the English language"), and they didn't even have a starting reference for it.

What to do? We next looked at Google Books, which now has an archive of published works going back to the 1500s, and found an obscure 1973 reference to a "lunch & learn" concept that was recorded in the U.S. Department of Agriculture's *Extension Service Review* journal. We found a partial passage in that Google Books document, which led us to the full document online, in which it was revealed that two housewives—Sandra Stockall and Jeanette Grantham of Nebraska—were said to have originated the term.² (It makes sense really. Only geeks like us actually want to know the origin of the term *lunch & learn*, and it's definitely not something that

occupies people's minds on a daily basis.)

In this book, Tim and I have tried to lighten up the subject matter some with the comedic aspects of business speak. It is, in a way, its own kind of folly. But when it comes to origins, we were dead serious. We relied heavily on trusted sources (which we detail in the acknowledgments), including the *OED*, which really is an amazing resource.³ And where possible, to supplement what we found, we tried to locate the original documentation or confirm with other reputable sources.

One thing we've realized in this whole process is that if you want to be known for coining something, make sure to document it. For example, if you want to invent a new term—let's say it's a new style of music called “thrash disco”—you have to put it somewhere in writing so the Internet will see it. Then, you need to spread the word about your new term and how you invented it. By doing so, you will become the “victor” of that phrase's history, and all the spoils will flow to you—and reward you with Internet glory.⁴

But why does this dictionary even have to exist? Why do so many people in the business world feel the need to use words and terms that they may not really know the origins of and don't use anywhere else in their daily lives? Noble-Grange has two theories.

“One reason is influence,” she says. “How do you get people to do what you want them to do? Persuade them or influence them. It's called likability. You want people to like you, so you use the language that they use. You might start copying some of the stuff that they do. That helps build your likability. The other reason is credibility. You sound smart if you're using the words that the people who are above you are using. Some people will buy it. They'll listen to you and say, ‘Wow, you sound smart,’ not even questioning what it is that you're saying. [You] say it with such a tone, with such authority, [that you] sometimes [get] from a lot of people instant credibility, because it just sounds good.”

And that, my friends, is why *The BS Dictionary* is now in your life. We hope it increases your likability and credibility on the job, and that you enjoy it as much as we've enjoyed putting it together for you.

—Bob Wiltfong



24/365 *adv., adj.* twenty-four/three sixty-five **1.** 24 hours a day, 365 days a year. **2.** The ability to go for a full year with no rest and not dying.

BS Definition: I am not human. I am a cyborg. I feel no pity, remorse, or fear. I don't need to apply sunblock. Xbox is my spouse. I am Elon Musk.



Origin: The *OED* attributes the first usage of this phrase to basketball player Jerry Reynolds, who was quoted in *Sports Illustrated* in 1983 as saying his jump shot was “good 24 hours a day, seven days a week, 365 days a year.” Reynolds, at the time, played in college for Louisiana State University, and he evidently thought very highly of himself. Otherwise, why would he say his jump shot never took a break like, literally, ever?¹

24/7 *adv., adj.* twenty-four/seven **1.** 24 hours a day, seven days a week. **2.** The ability to go all day and night without sleep.

BS Definition: I'm serious; I'm Elon Musk. Tell me how to find Sarah Connor or die.

Origin: Score another one for Jerry Reynolds! The origin for 24/7 can also be traced to the basketball player (see 24/365). We wanted to know if he was really that good. I mean, we're basketball fans, and we've never heard of the guy, so we researched his stats. Turns out, Reynolds would go on to an eight-year career in the NBA playing for the Milwaukee Bucks, Seattle Supersonics, and Orlando Magic. Not bad. With that

said, his career 41.8 percent field-goal percentage is below the NBA's 43.5 percent average for players of that same era. So, perhaps Reynolds wasn't everything he claimed to be. Mathematically speaking, a more accurate fraction to describe his jump shot would be $4/10$ (or . . . carry the two . . . $2/5$). However, saying your jump shot is good for about 10 out of 24 hours a day or about three out of seven days a week doesn't sound nearly as cool as "24/7" or "24/365," so good on you, Jerry Reynolds. Good on you.²

360° *adj., n.* three hundred sixty degree 1. From a variety of workplace sources, usually done in a confidential way. 2. The name given to a kind of leadership assessment that comprises feedback from a variety of colleagues.

BS Definition: Going around real sneaky-like and only getting the opinions that help get that [beep] in marketing fired.



Origin: A circle has 360 degrees, which is the origin for this phrase in the business world: a complete, circular view of things. The origin of 360 degrees for a circle is traced to the Mesopotamians (some would say, more specifically, the Babylonians), who developed a base-60 numerical system, which they then passed to the Egyptians. The Egyptians had a 360-day calendar year, which was not far off from our 365-day calendar. They figured, based on the position of the stars, that the Earth moved one degree until it got back to its same position in 360 days, completing a full circle. Hence, the 360-degree circle, as we now know it.³

According to the *OED*, the first known figurative reference to a "360-degree" view of things comes from the July 11, 1965, edition of the *New York Times Book Review* (its review of *The Liberation of Lord Byron Jones* by Jesse Hill Ford): "Seen in the purest perspectives of fiction, this

book . . . is curiously disappointing. As a 360-degree examination of the 'situation' in the South of the 1960s, however, it has stunning sociological relevance."

In popular parlance, this term is often misused (particularly in the United States), with people saying things like, "He's made a complete 360-degree turn in his life." If you do the math, that means the person is back where he started.⁴

A

aboveboard *adj., adv.* 1. Legitimate, honest, open. 2. In open view, without tricks, concealment, or disguise.

BS Definition: 1. Usually just the opposite. 2. Trust us. You don't want to see what's below board.

Origin: Researchers at the *OED* say references to this term first appeared in print in 1594 with an origin in gambling, particularly cards. To play “aboveboard” meant keeping your cards above the level of the playing table (as opposed to being in one’s lap) to avoid any suspicion of cheating. The board, in this case, is a table. Conversely, playing “under board” meant you might be dishonest. That 1594 citation comes from *Terrors of the Night*, first edition, by Elizabethan pamphleteer Thomas Nashe: “Now that he [Satan] is thoroughly steeled in his scutcherie, hee playes aboue-board boldly, & sweeps more stakes than euer he did before.” In 1623, clergyman Richard Carpenter used a closer version of the BS phrase in *The Conscionable Christian*: “All his dealings are square and above the boord.”¹



across-the-board *adj.* 1. Taking into account all classes or categories. 2. Applying to every part or individual.

BS Definition: Looking at more than the top four returns on the first page of your google search (and maybe venturing to the second page if you’re feeling really inspired).

Origin: As opposed to aboveboard, where *board* refers to a table, in this case *board* refers to the tote board, common at racetracks across the country, which shows odds or payouts useful for racetrack patrons. The reference to across-the-board comes from when a bet can be made across the board to win, place, or show—the three main payouts on the tote board for horses that finish first, second, or third. The first known documented reference to across-the-board as its own term came in 1901 in *The Atlanta Constitution*: “Cousin Jess won the steeplechase after a hard drive in the stretch, lowering the best previous time of 4 09 by seven seconds. Dr Einus in the fourth race, a 100 to 1 shot, heavily played across the board, ran second.”²

action *v.* 1. To put into practice. 2. To deal with.

BS Definition: 1. To use a noun in a verb-y kind of way. 2. Ironically, when used as a verb, it’s the first hint that the person speaking won’t actually be taking any real action.

Origin: Using action as a verb has been around for centuries. Its use as a noun came first in the legal world, derived in the 14th century from the old French word *accion*, meaning “lawsuit” or “case.”³ The *OED* reports that its first written reference as a verb wasn’t until 1734, in Henry Fielding’s play *Don Quixote in England*: “I don’t question but to action him out on’t.” Then the *OED* says action was used for the first time in its glorious BS form in the *Times* of London in 1960: “Full details taken, the message is actioned straight away.” We could give you more early citations of action as a verb, but we think it’s best that we action that item later.

action man/man of action *n.* 1. A person who prioritizes performance and deeds over words or contemplation. 2. A person whose life is defined by physical activity rather than intellectual matters.

BS Definition: How you see yourself when the boss tells you to do something, and you, in turn, tell your employees to do it.



Origin: A cow named Dinah is responsible for the earliest known reference of *action man* in writing. In 1943, the *Fresno Bee Republican* ran a piece about this record-breaking cow: “Maybe Dinah [a cow that produced 17 times her own weight in milk] and her owner . . . have caught some of the ‘miracle production’ philosophy of Henry J. Kaiser, the famous ship building action man of that state.” Action Man toys from the United Kingdom may also have played a role in making this a popular BS phrase. From 1966 to 1984, a company called Palitoy marketed Action Man dolls and figures based on the popular GI Joe action figures sold in the United States by Hasbro.⁴ For people who remember that, *action man* may very well mean “superhero figure who died a horrible death over and over again in the worst play-fighting seen this side of Ken and Barbie’s breakup.”

actionable *adj.* 1. Anything on which action can be taken. 2. Liable to a lawsuit.

BS Definition: Literally nothing on the list of items that comes from the innovation team.

Origin: The first known use of the word actionable—in the sense of providing grounds for a legal action—came in the early 1600s from an English antiquarian named William Lambarde and his work, *Archion: or, A Commentary Upon the High Courts of Justice in England*: “Baited, & bitten with libells & slanders that be not actionable.”⁵ Eventually, the term evolved to mean anything that is capable of being acted on, coming into usage in the 20th century. One early citation comes from Christine Frederick’s 1913 book *The New Housekeeping: Efficiency Studies in Home*

Management: “Refuse to let the mind wallow and dawdle around a problem without arriving at definite, actionable conclusions.”⁶

admin *n.* Administrative assistant.

BS Definition: 1. Personal slave. 2. Officially, an individual who isn’t supposed to exercise independent judgment or discretion. Practically, the individual who makes all the decisions in the office. 3. The person you refer to as “what’s-his-face” or “what’s-her-face” in moments of forgetfulness.



Origin: Although *admin* can refer to a system administrator, the primary reference for our *BS Dictionary* purposes is the reference to the role once occupied by a secretary. *Admin* itself is an abbreviation originating in the 15th century from the Middle French *administrateur*, meaning “one who has been given authority to manage.” However, today the word is often connected with the role of an administrative assistant (who, ironically, has no authority to manage or has all the authority in the world, depending on the role). The first known reference to an “admin” as an administrative assistant comes from Armistead Maupin’s series of novels, *Tales of the City*—specifically the first volume, from 1978: “I was . . . an admin assistant for the past year and a half.”⁷ Eventually, *admin* became the *nom de rigueur* as the term *secretary* went out of style in the late 20th century. The big turning point came in 1998, when Professional Secretaries International (formerly the National Secretaries Association) changed its official name to the International Association of Administrative Professionals, recognizing the larger societal shift.⁸

against the grain *idiom* 1. Different from the standard. 2. Counter to what is usual or normal.

BS Definition: 1. That Halloween office party where you intentionally dressed up as a Hershey's kiss (even though you knew some would think you were the poop emoji instead). 2. Decorating your office cubicle with Jonas Brothers posters.

Origin: Although this phrase invokes images of cutting against a wood grain (which woodcutters say you do at your peril), there are no references to wood in early uses of the phrase.⁹ Indeed, the first documented use of against the grain comes from Shakespeare in the 1607 play *Coriolanus*, a tragedy based on the life of Roman leader Gaius Marcius Coriolanus.¹⁰ It is one of the last two tragedies written by The Bard, the other one being *Antony and Cleopatra*. The citation reads as follows:

Say, you chose him
More after our commandment than as guided
By your own true affections, and that your minds,
Preoccupied with what you rather must do
Than what you should, made you against the grain
To voice him consul: lay the fault on us.¹¹

all-hands meeting *n.* A mandatory meeting for all employees.

BS Definition: 1. When management tells you that, despite the poor financial outlook, you're ready to rise up like Simba in Act III of *The Lion King*. 2. When company leaders interrupt your day to give you the reasons you should be back at your desk working.

Origin: This expression is believed to have evolved from the late 16th century naval term *all hands*, which referred to an entire ship's company. A related term includes *all hands on deck*, which was a call for all sailors to come to the deck of a ship, particularly to help in times of crisis.¹² In 1655, the term started to appear for the first time in a work context: "Then would all hands be set a-work, and every one would become

instrumental to serve himself and his Neighbours in Love.”¹³ An all-hands meeting doesn’t necessarily connote a crisis, though it certainly can be an occasion for one (see the Google or Facebook all-hands meetings of 2018).¹⁴ Before the days of the Internet, all-hands meetings were relatively closed affairs, and the information presented was available primarily to employees who attended. Today, however, many companies are learning that information presented in an all-hands meeting can quickly end up on a reporter’s Twitter feed.

an ax to grind *idiom* 1. To have a selfish reason for saying or doing something. 2. To have an ulterior motive of revenge.

BS Definition: 1. The feeling you get when you see your former boss—the one who laid you off by saying the company was “rightsizing”—at the grocery store and immediately start thinking of ways to beat them to the checkout aisle. 2. For those classic literary types, think Edmund Dantes’ long-awaited revenge against Mondego in the Alexander Dumas’ *The Count of Monte Cristo*. For those comic-book types, think Marv avenging the death of Goldie in Frank Miller’s *Sin City*.



Origin: This phrase is commonly attributed to Benjamin Franklin, though some claim its first use was by a fellow Pennsylvania writer, Charles Miner; both men wrote cautionary tales regarding the sharpening of axes. Franklin’s autobiography, which was written in his later years and published posthumously in 1791, has a story of a man who asks a blacksmith to sharpen his ax, but ends up working the grindstone himself. Meanwhile, Miner is believed to be the author of an anonymous 1810 piece in the Pennsylvania newspaper *The Centinel*, under the title “Who’ll Turn Grindstone?” in which he first uses the phrase *axe to grind*:

When I see a man holding a fat office, sounding ‘the horn on the borders’ to call the people to support the man on whom he depends for his office. Well, thinks I, no wonder the man is zealous in the cause, he evidently has an axe to grind.”¹⁵

anointed *n.* A blessed or preordained person or thing.

BS Definition: 1. An employee who can’t seem to do anything wrong in the eyes of management. 2. The last person in the office invited to Friday’s happy hour.

Origin: This BS term is derived from the mid-14th-century French word *enoint*, meaning to spread oil on or to smear with oil, ointment, milk, butter, or other fat. Such acts have been used in various religions to introduce a divine presence of some kind or as part of a ceremonial consecration. For example, one anointing of Jesus is said to have occurred when Mary of Bethany poured oil over his feet. According to the *OED*, the term started to be used as a noun as early as the 1500s. Today, anointing can have a more secular connotation, though it does still typically involve a “chosen one” assuming a position of power. And while there is not a physical spreading of oil or butter on that individual, we’re sure some co-workers would like to smear that person in one form or fashion.¹⁶

ask *n.* A request or an inquiry.

BS Definition: 1. We’re efforting a solve for this first BS definition. The takeaway is, we’ll give the share as soon as the build is complete. 2. Used when you feel like the word *request* or *question* isn’t cool enough.

Origin: There is some debate about using *ask* as a noun—that is, whether or not it’s a real usage. In truth, *ask* has been used as a noun for about 1,000 years.¹⁷ In particular, the *OED* has three early citations of

it, between roughly 1000 and 1230, although the way we encounter it today is primarily a 1980s phenomenon. (Again, more evidence of how the '80s screwed up everything.) By 2004, *ask* as a noun had become so obnoxious that Raymond Chen, a senior Microsoft programmer, wrote about the ubiquitous appearance of the word in a corporate context:

Ask (as a noun)

This has taken over Microsoft-speak in the past year or so and it drives me batty. “What are our key asks here?”, you might hear in a meeting. Language tip: The thing you are asking for is called a “request.” Plus, of course, the thing that is an “ask” is usually more of a “demand” or “requirement.” But those are such unfriendly words, aren't they? Why not use a warm, fuzzy word like “ask” to take the edge off?

Answer: Because it's not a word.¹⁸

at the end of the day *idiom* 1. After analyzing all possibilities. 2. Equivalent to saying, “When all is said and done,” “At this moment in time,” or “Bottom line.”

BS Definition: Another way to say, “I like to say unnecessary words before giving my opinion.”



Origin: The earliest documented use of the phrase comes from a sermon first published posthumously in 1826 by Reverend Ebenezer Erskine (1680–1754), a Scottish minister. Erskine and his fiery orations led to the establishment of the Secession Church (formed by dissenters of the Church of Scotland). He used the phrase much like one would today:

Christ's flock is but a little flock, comparatively considered. . . .
They are but little in respect of their numbers. Indeed abstractly

authoritatively

A

considered, at the end of the day, they will make an “innumerable company, which no man can number”; but, viewed in comparison of the wicked, they are but few.¹⁹

The term gained more popularity in the 1980s (again, more evidence that the '80s helped destroy the world as we know it), but by 2008, *at the end of the day* was so despised that it was voted the most annoying cliché in a British poll.²⁰

authoritatively *adv.* Having the sanction or weight of authority.

BS Definition: The ability to be bossy and bullsh*t people at the same time while keeping a straight face.

Origin: According to the *OED*, the first documented use of “authoritatively” occurred around 1443 in Reginald Pecock’s *The Reule of Crysten Religioun* (edited by William Cabell Greet): “Alle hem which he knowip certeynly be synners and brekers of þi law, god, þat he denounce auctoritatively.” Derived from the medieval Latin word *auctoritativus*, the term implied anything from describing dictatorial behavior to someone acting with approval or sanction.

Today, the term is sometimes used to ridicule others who seem to act in an authoritative manner, yet perhaps lack such actual influence.²¹ Our favorite references include the hard-throwing, rough-around-the-edges minor league pitcher Nuke Laloosh in the film *Bull Durham*, who wanted “to announce my presence with authority,” and Dwight Schrute from the TV show *The Office*, who said of showing his authority over his co-workers, “I love catching people in the act. That’s why I always whip open doors.”²²



BS IS LIKE A BOX OF CHOCOLATES—PART I

Bull Durham with its BS-friendly dialogue of “announc[ing] my presence with authority” is just one example of movie lines that are creeping into the world of business speak. Famous lines from films have become a fun way for some people to communicate in business. Other examples include:

- “Coffee’s for closers” from *Glengarry Glenross*
- “May the force be with you” from *Star Wars*
- “I’ll be back” from *Terminator*
- “You talkin’ to me?” from *Taxi Driver*
- “We’re on a mission from God” from *The Blues Brothers*.

It’s a reminder of how much Hollywood shapes how we communicate on a day-to-day basis. Here are our top eight most influential movie lines that apply to the working world and why they translate so well as business speak.

No. 8

“Show me the money!” (*Jerry Maguire*)

Why It’s Influential: A great line from a great scene, this is perfectly applicable to any business situation. However, its brilliance is sometimes overshadowed by an even better line from that same movie: “You had me at hello.”

Why It Works in Business Speak: “Money talks; bullsh*t walks” (without any cursing)—this movie line suggests to any business partners that the best way for them to show they value you or your contributions is to pay you money for it.



No. 7

“If you build it, [they] will come.” (*Field of Dreams*)

Why It’s Influential: This movie will make you laugh. It will make you cry. Set in a small town in Iowa, it tells the story of farmer Ray Kinsella (played by Kevin Costner), who hears voices that tell him to build a baseball park in the middle of one of his corn fields. When he does, ghosts appear to him (including his own dead father) that demonstrate the power of second chances in life.

Why It Works in Business Speak: This line is often used to justify investments in things with no strong customer base at the moment. Starbucks, for instance, followed this mantra when building a demand for coffee shops. Apple leaned on the idea when marketing the iPad. The reality is, Kevin Costner’s character almost lost his farm building his baseball park in a corn field—a possible outcome that many businesses seem to ignore when embracing the idea that simply building a great business will draw a customer base to you.

No. 6

“I’m gonna make him an offer he can’t refuse.”
(*The Godfather*)

Why It’s Influential: So many great lines came from this movie. Our personal favorite is “leave the gun; take the cannoli.” However, “I’m gonna make him an offer he can’t refuse” is perfectly applicable to business, and has become a popular line when someone is trying to close a deal.

Why It Works in Business Speak: Nothing says you’re serious about making a business deal better than quoting the Mafia. This is an organization that is willing to put a dead horse’s head into a movie producer’s bed just to send a message, for goodness sake!

No. 5.

“What we’ve got here . . . is failure to communicate”
(*Cool Hand Luke*)

Why It’s Influential: The Captain (Strother Martin) hits Luke (the always cool Paul Newman), knocking him to the ground, and then delivers this famous line:

What we’ve got here is . . . failure to communicate. Some men you just can’t reach. So, you get what we had here last week, which is the way he wants it . . . well, he gets it! I don’t like it any more than you men.

What makes this particularly memorable is Martin’s delivery, a kind of stuttering, staccato-like emphasis on various words, which was memorably replicated at the beginning of the Guns N’ Roses song *Civil War* from 1991.

Why It Works in Business Speak: Ever been in that meeting where two colleagues are simply talking past each other and nothing gets accomplished? This is a great one-liner to use *after* that meeting, when walking out with the other staff present. That said, a word of caution: Don’t even try to replicate Martin’s vocal-gymnastic cadence. It won’t work out well.

See part II of this sidebar for our top four movie lines used in BS on page 40.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



Bob Wiltfong is a former correspondent on *The Daily Show With Jon Stewart*, an Emmy award-winning journalist, as well as a public relations expert, content specialist, and coach. His love for BS was fostered through more than 20 years of working as a consultant in presentation skills for several Fortune 500 companies, including T-Mobile, General Electric and Charles Schwab. He often confirms trending BS terms with his CMO wife and is reminded that he has a lot more to learn from his three kids.



Tim Ito is vice president of marketing at the Washington Speakers Bureau and a former vice president of content at the Association for Talent Development. He also currently teaches digital marketing to master's students at Georgetown's School of Continuing Studies. Tim ran the content marketing group for the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. He was a senior editor and producer at AltaVista and WashingtonPost.com and a reporter and writer for *U.S. News & World Report* magazine. He is a co-author of the ATD Press title *Focus on Them: Become the Manager Your People Need You to Be*. His wife and two kids can vouch for the fact that he is full of BS.

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