

## An Opinion on Unjustifiably Ill-fated Words and Twisted Connotations Uses in Management and Workplace Organization

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**Abstract:** *Common words used in management activities are often misinterpreted or gained twisted connotations over the years of possible misuse. Our analysis of standard management terms frequently involved in interpersonal communication indicated that they are used incorrectly, with an assumed sense that departed from the original meaning. They are also perceived and interpreted in discussions with a twisted angle, which frequently leads to miscommunications with downstream effects on projects execution and timelines. Other times, these terms are outright avoided because of their unjustly acquired fame of being wrongly interpreted, motivating us to review their original meaning and how they should be used and perceived. Even grandfathered terms are at some point due for an analysis that can lead to re-establishing their original, intended sense, to bringing them back from obscurity to common use or to indicating that they are indeed appropriate to being used in certain contexts. We provide herein a different perspective on "reading between the lines" and we also explore alternative meanings beyond the immediate sense of words that sometimes might be incorrectly used in managerial activities. The purpose of this manuscript is to rehabilitate the original sense of these common terms and thus to guide the users to their true meaning that would minimize miscommunication issues and misinterpretations. The ultimate goal of this review commentary paper is to offer meaningful management perspectives of the twisted and ill-fated words connotation.*

**Keywords:** Management terminology; words connotations; organization; learning; micro-management; management language

### Introduction

While walking the winded path of leading people and managing projects, we came across several rather ordinary words and/or grandfathered expressions, with a specific and precise meaning that somehow became ill-fated by acquiring twisted connotations. There are also some exceptions of words that may have a rather ambiguous meaning and that came out of their obscurity, gaining confidence in how they are used, especially in today's society. Following



review of various literature sources, we chose examples from each end of the spectrum, sharing how they can be perceived or understood in different ways, depending on the context. The purpose of this review commentary paper is to offer meaningful management perspectives of twisted and ill-fated words connotations, which are usually used in the workplace organization.

Although management terms seem to have the same connotations as in plain English, their meaning could be sometimes different depending on the context of use. For example, learning words in English is a straightforward activity based often on a single, directional meaning, whereas management learning has a variety of intentions, from content to process learning, and further to critical reflections and towards *theoractive learning* (Rajbhandari, 2018). This concept introduced by Rajbhandari et al., 2011 is based upon content and process learning and on critical reflexivity, which all support the contextualization of theory into practice, based on clear applicability of otherwise abstract, solitary concepts. Within this context, the managerial terms we selected for our analysis fit right in and describe how one could use them often incorrectly or with an assumed misunderstanding of their meaning.

Even though management in itself is a rather technical field, the words that it is built upon are generally understood. There is however a thin line between processing the meaning of generic English terms and of management wording, and these fine-tuned differences are the indicators of margin of error and margin of mistake (Rajbhandari, 2019). Minimizing such differences can offer a precise meaning of management terms.

### *Opportunity*

In management, opportunity could be perceived differently and may accumulate various hidden meanings, from risk taking behavior to efficiency management. For example, in management few other words combined with opportunity can give a way different meaning such as opportunity cost, opportunity management (Deszczyński, 2016), opportunity risk (Ivascu & Cioca, 2014), etc.

As a regular term, opportunity is defined as “a set of circumstances that makes it possible to do something” (Oxford Languages Dictionary). In itself, an opportunity is an open door to something usually aspired to or dreamed of. In the workplace, this would also mean a chance to advance one’s own learning, to take on more responsibilities and even earn a promotion (Radev, 2013; Cliffe, 2014). All these directions seem positive. The reality is often the opposite when the “opportunity” does not organically come through as a result of a brainstorming session or when not proposed as a natural outcome of a discussion or meeting. For example, if an opportunity is presented by managers to their direct reports or is delegated by a peer, more often than not there is a fine print or a hidden catch that is not obvious: either the project is very difficult or lengthy and the manager does not want or have the time to take it on; an activity may involve travel to remote locations that are not that appealing to the one seemingly giving away the opportunity; or the activity may have the direct report/peer interact or collaborate with staff who are difficult to work with.



The one offered the opportunity is often looking for or forward to a path for advancement and does not dedicate much time to analyze the proposal, and as a consequence agrees to take on the “great” opportunity which seemed to have just presented itself. Therefore, while the intent of an opportunity is positive, sometimes not reading between the lines may give it hidden connotations unveiled only later on, when realizing the challenge behind what seemed to be a great occasion towards progress. One way to avoid taking the first opportunity that comes around is to do the “homework” on the topic by asking appropriate, relevant questions and taking the time to think before providing acceptance. “Opportunity” in itself is a word with hopeful connotations that can often masquerade a huge hurdle and thus turn quickly into a trap for those ending up with a task that they don’t enjoy or are capable of completing.

### *(Being) opportunistic*

(Being) Opportunistic is defined in itself as “exploiting chances offered by immediate circumstances without reference to a general plan or moral principle” (Oxford Languages Dictionary). Taken literally, being opportunistic may mean being without scruples or taking advantage of somebody or of a situation without any remorse. This literal meaning of the word is quite the opposite to what opportunistic may mean when one is under strenuous conditions: quite an asset for someone working under the pressure of time, for example, or constantly prioritizing multiple tasks in the same time (Ng & vanDuinkerken, 2021). In this context, being opportunistic means to be capable to redirect, to pivot or to change priorities in a split second, which is not otherwise possible without being an organized person, with an overarching view of the tasks at hand. This is one word that we found being ill-fated without any justified reason and which we are trying to redefine in the context involving daily interactions with staff and projects. Being opportunistic is undoubtedly an asset of those for whom time is a scarce resource and who are trying to use the limited supply at their disposal in a given circumstance and in the most effective, efficient way. For this reason, we consider being opportunistic in the workplace as a critical skill to have or achieve and improve.

### *Compromise*

In management, compromise is often associated with conflict management resolution (Oachesu, 2016). As a word used in regular conversations, “compromise” is defined as “an agreement or a settlement of a dispute that is reached by each side making concessions. Accept standards that are lower than is desirable” (Oxford Languages Dictionary). In the common use of the word, “compromise” may also indicate that one party of a negotiation process steps into it with an assumed loss of property or moral values. We consider the compromise as the building block of the art of negotiation (Aarons-Mele, 2013; Vojvodic et al., 2019). This skill is very difficult to grasp, especially if not personality inherent. In general, we give some to get some and rarely can we fully win a negotiation. The compromise is a tool with several layers, peeled off one by one depending on how the discussion advances. When grasped, the art of balancing a negotiation based on compromise becomes quite enticing as long as there is a line that cannot or must not be crossed, as otherwise would truly affect the outcome of a project or



plan. The compromise layers could be materialized in offerings regarding staffing, financial support, time flexibility or constraints, etc., and they need to be thrown in the game when and if needed. Hence, not merely an explanation or cover of diehard win/loss, but rather incremental gains for both sides adding up to each agenda.

### *Challenge*

Challenge is defined as “a new or difficult task that tests somebody’s ability and skill” according to the Oxford Languages Dictionary. This is indeed the immediate meaning that comes to mind, in the form of an unsurmountable, unplanned road block encountered within a project or plan. In this scenario, the challenge is uncontrollable and the outcome of the efforts put forth to address it unpredictable. Often times however, managers pose challenges purposely to their direct reports in order to support their growth by forcing them to get out of the comfort zone and to explore uncharted territories in terms of skills they need to acquire or improve (MacDonald, 2013; Turner, 2017; Henderson, 2025). These challenges can be materialized in the form of an assignment of difficult tasks, in the need to multi-task, having limited time or staffing to complete a project, encountering sudden or unexpected changes of plans, priorities, or even direction of a project that could lead to its abandonment.

Similarly, direct reports could pose challenges to managers such as questioning an existing, established process for its current efficiency or by proposing a simplified pathway that would increase speed or output. In both situations, the word “challenge” should be interpreted with a positive connotation as it contributes greatly to the growth of all parties involved. An example of such a view on the word “challenge” comes from sports: in tennis, a player may question a line call and ask the umpire to review the ball themselves (on clay surface) or by using the built-in ball tracking system (on hard surface or on grass). The chances of success for the player are equal, 50-50, and are more often than not considered worth risking. From the umpire’s perspective, the challenge contributes to the improvement of umpire’s acuity or evaluates the accuracy of the Hawk-Eye systems. Even if the outcome may be a failure which leads to losing a challenge in tennis or to an abandoned project in managerial terms, the learnings gained during the process may be used as invaluable knowledge for other activities in the future.

### *(The relativity) of a minute*

It is engrained in our training immediately after joining the workforce to approach a conversation, especially if not scheduled or pre-planned, with the formal question “Do you have a minute?”. Nearly never a conversation that starts like that will end in that single minute. And yet, depending on the situational use of the 1 minute, it could also seem relatively long even though in reality the length of this time unit is always the same. For example, in laboratory assays some steps are conducted 1 minute apart. When 10-15 steps need to be conducted within that single minute, time goes extremely fast, while when a single step is conducted, waiting for the completion of the minute seems to take forever. For this reason, the concept of the 1 minute



qualified for this topic as it is often used in a misleading but often sincerely unintentional way, especially when initiating a conversation.

### *Micromanagement*

Workplace environment consists of various groups ranging from micro- to meso- to macro-environment (Rajbhandari, 2017), which shape the organizational culture, climate and encourage a motivational environment for all within the organization (Rajbhandari, 2024). Controlling is an integral part of managing micro- and meso-environments.

Micromanagement is defined as “the practice of controlling every detail of an activity or project, especially your employees’ work” (Oxford Languages Dictionary). The immediate reaction to this word is of rejection as it has an inherent demeaning connotation, with presumed belittling intentions of one’s work. Despite the classic unwelcoming meaning of this word, micromanaging is needed at the beginning of one’s career, regardless of the field (Goldsmith & Goldsmith, 2012; Green, 2015; Mishra et al., 2019; Fisher et al., 2021). When entering the workforce, the experience is limited and possibly not directly related to the projects of the workplace. Therefore, guidance is imperative to be provided by the manager, be it in directing how to prioritize or multi-task, how to present information and interpret results, etc., with the ultimate goal of self-betterment. The less resistance posed by the direct report in the initial phases of employment, likely the shorter the micromanaging period. However, it is necessary for the two parties to collaborate. It is expected for the manager to share as much knowledge and strategies as possible and to be willing to become hands-off after the initial period of hands-on. In the same time, the direct report should be willing to learn, be open to receiving frequent feedback and to show implementation of the knowledge thus gained. The end goal of micromanaging as a grooming period is to support the employees to become capable of making their own decisions and thus consult less with the manager, while securing their independence and relative control over their work.

### *Being on top of things, doing the best, working on it and having it all under control*

This is a wide category of expressions rather than single words used with the intention to instill confidence that a project is on track for timely completion. The reality is many times just the opposite, while the one in charge of a project, task or mission is struggling to meet deadlines, to make efficient use of resources and to accomplish more with less. This series of expressions became the default go to when trying to state in a professional way that one is not quite where they needed to be at a given moment, but they are not comfortable sharing the challenges encountered. When hearing these statements, managers should immediately react by asking additional questions rather than feeling reassured that all is in order. The manager can redirect the project, can provide more resources or assign themselves to part of the work if that saves the project. These expressions are all misnomers often falsely conveying that a project is on par with the timeline that are not interpreted accurately by those at the receiving end. In



management, doing, seeing, and acting are parts of a learning process and are conceived differently as an experimental type of learning (Kolb, 1984).

## Conclusions

We analyzed the current meanings and interpretations of these words in the context of how they are used by managers and their direct reports. One aspect that should be explored further relates to strategies that managers can use to effectively enable their subordinates to “read between the lines”. The process usually starts with the managers identifying the miscommunications and continues with addressing them directly, during mentoring or one-on-one sessions and by providing examples of issues and solutions from their own experience. This topic surely warrants further exploration. Another angle that could be analyzed is how workers with different skill levels, seniority, or at various times in their careers could interpret or react to certain words or phrases. Adding to this complex topic would be to explore whether workers whose first language is not English might be prone to misinterpreting these terms or to investigate if they have a more accepting or straightforward acceptance of these terms. Within this manuscript, our ultimate goal was to bring awareness of the misconceptions surrounding such commonly used words and to bring justice to some of the terms having ill intended stigmas surrounding them and the unavoidable misunderstanding of such. There are likely so many others that could have been included but those listed in our manuscript are the ones most frequently misused in the current managerial landscape.

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**Paper Received March 8, 2025; Accepted April 7, 2025; Published May 2, 2025**

