

Euphemistic Language at Work

A **euphemism** is a “mild or indirect word or expression substituted for one considered to be too harsh or blunt when referring to something unpleasant or embarrassing.”



Euphemistic language at work (especially in toxic workplaces) is used to sanitize organizational and/or interpersonal harm to make it sound acceptable, normal, or neutral. It's used to paint a different picture of reality - one where discussing the consequences and impacts of actions taken are ignored or thought of as “taboo” or “risky” (which really means they just had no intent on resolving or address these impacts).

You'll notice that many of these euphemisms are not outright lies - and this is part of the trickery. Euphemistic language is a form of truth made “less threatening” in an attempt discourage dissent- where part of the truth is left out or redressed in a way to gain buy-in for things most people wouldn't agree to if they truly understood what is being said.

Learning to decode euphemistic language can help you know what's really going on, who's manipulating things, and who is controlling perceptions and outcomes.

Instead of focusing on shared goals, alignment, and organizational growth (as they say), many (toxic) organizations are focused on:

- making you tolerant of ambiguity, so that these language tactics feel normal and are tolerated easily
- cheapening morality to make it easier for you to choose less than moral decisions
- activities aligned to maintaining social order, rather than those aligned with organizational goals and purpose



Examples of Euphemisms at Work

Here are a few examples of euphemistic language you may have heard in your workplace and what they really mean:

Euphemism	What It Really Means
"We just need buy-in"	We know resistance exists, but we'll never address it
".Not a good culture fit."	This person will not conform and is problematic
"We're listening...."	...but will make no commitment to take action
"Please keep this confidential..."	(when used ambiguously) signals possible triangulation or information control (who knows what)
"That's just how things work here."	We have no plans on examining our own behavior and will likely never change
"Cost optimization"	Labor reduction is preferred over systemic improvement and accountability
"Strategic realignment"	Organizational goals and interests have changed to serve leadership (or investor) interests
"Flattening the organization"	Removing decision authority from the middle and pushing accountability downward
"You're overthinking things.."	Your observations and insights are inconvenient; we can't/don't want to talk about what you are bringing up