Work & Talk Survey
Therapy Speak at Work

May 2023 • The Harris Poll Thought Leadership Practice
This survey was conducted online within the U.S. by The Harris Poll from April 28th to 30th, 2023, among a nationally representative sample of 2,075 U.S. adults.

This research comprises of 810 full-time employees, including 79 Gen Z (ages 18-25), 413 Millennials (ages 26-41), 272 Gen X (ages 42-57), and 105 Boomers (ages 58 and older).

“Therapy speak” refers to an empathetic sounding, often vague, language and/or tone used to indicate understanding, but often misses the mark or the appropriate follow-through.
Top Highlights

- Two-thirds of American employees (66%) have experienced some kind of cutbacks within the last year, such as reduced spending budgets (37%), pause on new hiring (33%), reduced flexibility to work remotely (31%), slashed employee benefits (30%), reduced or eliminated raises and bonuses (both 29%), as well as layoffs (28%).
- Employees report that employers don’t know how to communicate or discuss sensitive topics. Four in 10 view their employer’s communication announcing reduced or eliminated raises for employees as insensitive, while 36% say so about discussing autonomy related to remote or hybrid work.
- Two-thirds of American workers say they have experienced “therapy speak” at work (i.e., empathetic sounding, often vague, language and/or tone used to indicate the understanding, but often missing the mark or the appropriate follow-through), including eight in 10 Millennials (79%). A third experienced it from their direct manager (34%) and company leadership (33%).
- Employees tune out when they detect “therapy speak,” viewing these catchphrases as disingenuous statements. Most popular phrases include: “your feedback is important to us,” “we’re all in this together,” and “we understand that this may be challenging.” Four in 10 (45%) do not believe statements such as “we’re like family” or “this is a growth opportunity” (i.e., when employer asks for additional work without increased compensation or promotion.
- American employees are increasingly skeptical of their employers’ intentions, seeing right through the communications tactics, as seven in 10 (71%) state: “I can easily see through my company’s ingenuine friendly or empathetic tone in their communications,” and “it’s hypocritical of my leadership to cut corners in my workplace (e.g., decreasing budgets or hiring), while pocketing in a lot of money in bonuses” (69%).
- “Therapy speak” makes American employees more resentful toward the leadership team (57%) and less excited about their jobs (59%), with half going as far as thinking about looking for a new job (50%)
- Eight in 10 American employees say communication at work heavily affects how they feel about their jobs (79%), and that they “prefer a genuine and honest communication over ‘therapy speak’ at work” (81%).
The Rise of Therapy Speak in the Workplace
American workers are on edge, as two-thirds have experienced some sort of cutbacks within the last year, including slashed raises and bonuses, layoffs.

Did any of the following apply to your current employer in the last 12 months?

- Reduced spending budgets (e.g., department, travel, etc.) - 37%
- Froze or paused new hiring or backfilling roles - 33%
- Communicated a pause or caution about budget spending - 32%
- Reduced flexibility to work remotely - 31%
- Reduced, eliminated, or increased the cost of employee benefits - 30%
- Reduced or eliminated raises this year for employees - 29%
- Reduced or eliminated bonuses this year for employees - 29%
- Announced layoffs - 28%

Q: TSW01. Did any of the following apply to your current employer in the last 12 months? (n=810 total)
Employees report that employers don’t know how to communicate bad news, citing insensitive communications across tough topics.

**Employer’s insensitivity on how they approached the situation through communication**

- Announcing reduced or eliminated raises this year for employees: 43% 52% Women
- Discussing autonomy regarding remote or hybrid work: 36%
- Announcing layoffs in my company: 33%
- Announcing reduced or eliminated bonuses for employees this year: 32%
- Taking time off for vacations: 31%
- Accommodation or flexibility related to being a parent: 28%
- Accommodations around personal issues: 26%
- Taking time off due to an urgent matter: 25%
- Communicating a pause or caution about company budget spending: 24%

TSW03 How sensitive was your employer’s conduct during the following scenarios (i.e., how they approached the situation through communication)? (Top 2=Very/somewhat insensitive; n=810 total)
Two-thirds of American workers (67%) have experienced “therapy speak” at their workplace, including eight in 10 Millennials (79%).

Have you experienced “therapy speak” from any of the following people at your workplace?

- Direct manager: 34% (45% Millennials)
- Company leadership: 33% (41% Millennials)
- Team members or colleagues: 30% (40% Millennials)
- Business partners: 23% (36% Millennials)
- Clients: 19% (28% Millennials)
- Other: 1%
When “therapy speak” is detected by employees, they start to tune out, as they view the catchphrases as disingenuous sentiments.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Has your employer used any of the following phrases before?</th>
<th>Employer used the phrase</th>
<th>Not believeable to the employee</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Your feedback is important to us</td>
<td>62%</td>
<td>38%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>We’re all in this together</td>
<td>69%</td>
<td>31%</td>
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<tr>
<td>We understand that this may be challenging</td>
<td>71%</td>
<td>29%</td>
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<tr>
<td>We understand your point of view</td>
<td>73%</td>
<td>27%</td>
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<tr>
<td>We’re like family</td>
<td>80%</td>
<td>20%</td>
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<tr>
<td>We will win together</td>
<td>71%</td>
<td>29%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>We’re asking for your help</td>
<td>71%</td>
<td>29%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>These are the right steps</td>
<td>60%</td>
<td>40%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>This is a growth opportunity</td>
<td>i.e., additional work to add to your plate without increased compensation/promotion</td>
<td>45% 54% Boomers</td>
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TSW02 Has your employer used any of the following phrases before? (n=810 total)
Employees are increasingly skeptical of their employers’ intentions, report seeing right through the communications tactics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statement</th>
<th>Agreement</th>
<th>Team</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“I can easily see through my company’s ingenuine friendly or empathetic tone in their communications.”</td>
<td>71%</td>
<td>American Workers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“It’s hypocritical of my leadership to cut corners in my workplace (e.g., decreasing budgets or hiring), while pocketing in a lot of money in bonuses.”</td>
<td>69%</td>
<td>American Workers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“I feel like my employer ‘listens,’ but only to win arguments.”</td>
<td>55%</td>
<td>American Workers</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

76% Millennials

TSW04. How much do you agree or disagree with the following statements? (Top 2=Strongly/somewhat agree; n=810 total)
“Therapy speak” makes American employees more resentful and less excited, with half going as far as thinking about looking for a new job.

Encountering "therapy speak" at work makes me...

- More hesitant to recommend my employer to others: 61%
- Feel less excited about my job: 59% (64% Gen X)
- Feel resentment to the leadership team: 57% (62% Gen X)
- Feel less valued as an employee: 55% (62% Gen X)
- Feel less motivated to do good work: 50%
- Consider looking for a new job: 50%
This is impacting the quality of employee-employer relationships which feel more transactional and transitory.

60% American Workers

“I noticed that my work relationships (e.g., with my boss, colleagues, business partners, or clients) have become more transactional in nature (i.e., everything is strictly ‘business’) in the last 3 years.”

56% American Workers

“My company’s caring is very short-lived (i.e., there is no follow-through on plans, etc.)”

55% American Workers

“I don’t feel like my employer has my back in difficult situations (i.e., layoffs, reduced or eliminated incentives or benefits, etc.)”

63% Millennials

TSW04. How much do you agree or disagree with the following statements? (Top 2=Strongly/somewhat agree; n=810 total)
Eight in 10 American employees say communication at work heavily affects how they feel about their jobs, would prefer genuineness and honesty instead.

79% American Workers

“Communication at work heavily affects how I feel about my job.”

81% American Workers

“I prefer a genuine and honest communication over ‘therapy speak’ at work.”

84% Millennials, Women
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