

Work & Talk Survey

Therapy Speak at Work

May 2023 • The Harris Poll Thought Leadership Practice





Methodology

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

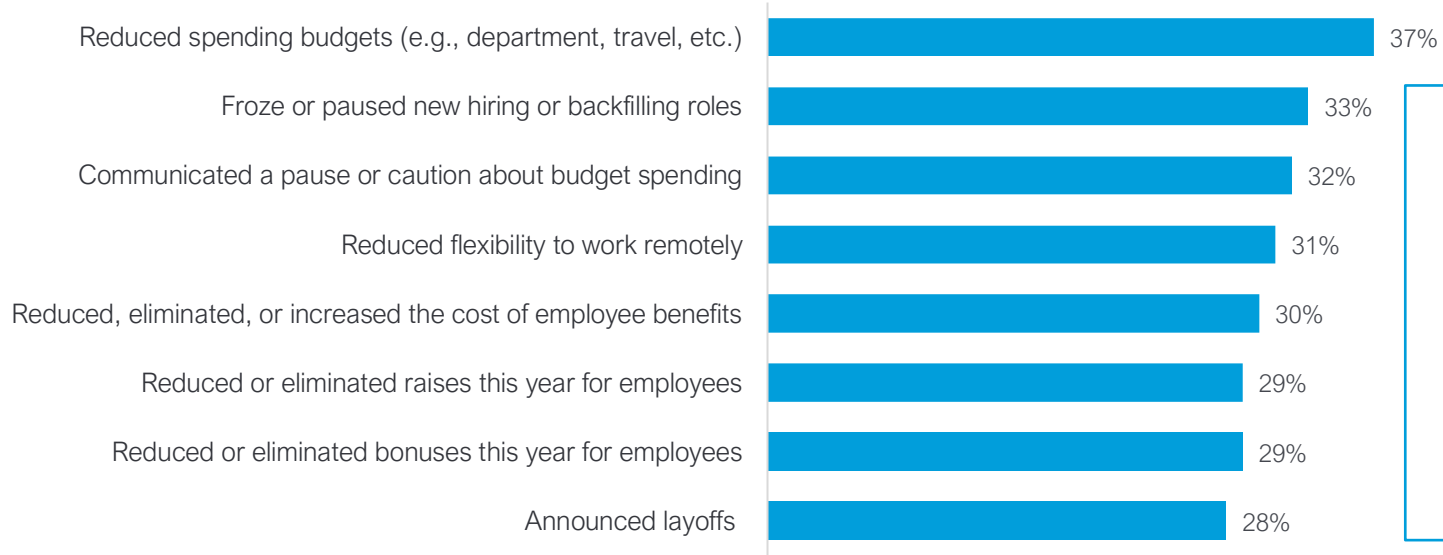
- Two-thirds of American employees (66%) have experienced some kind of cutbacks within the last year, such as reduced spending budgets (37%), pause on new hiring (33%), reduced flexibility to work remotely (31%), slashed employee benefits (30%), reduced or eliminated raises and bonuses (both 29%), as 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?

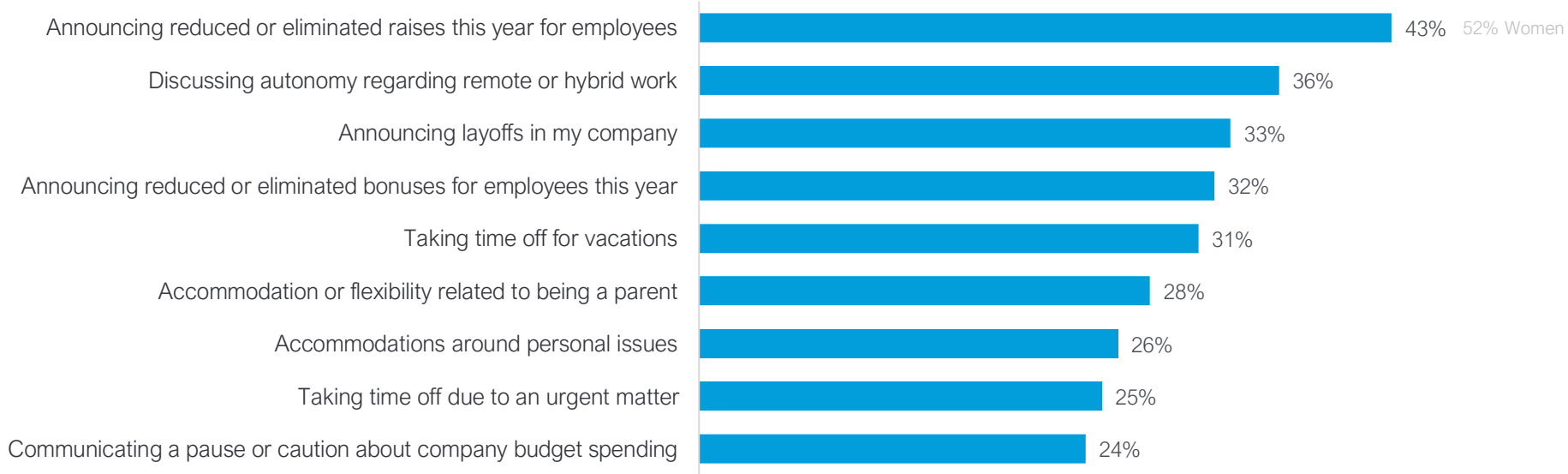


66%
 American Workers
 Have experienced at least one kind of a **cutback** in the last 12 months
 72% Millennials



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
(Very or somewhat insensitive)





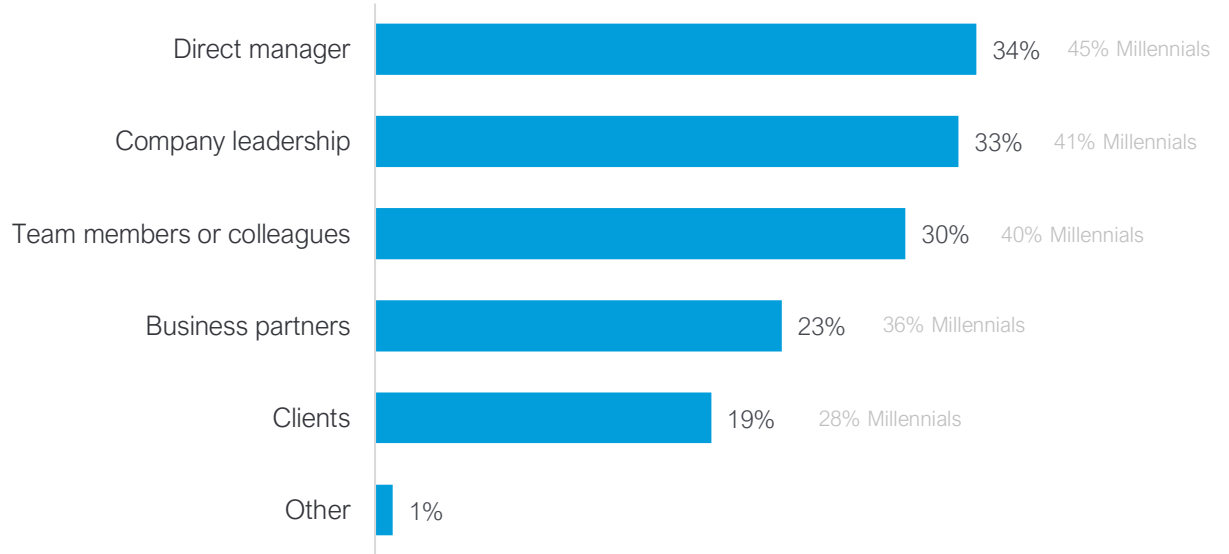
Two-thirds of American workers (67%) have experienced “therapy speak” at their workplace, including eight in 10 Millennials (79%)

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

67%
American Workers

I 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).

79% Millennials

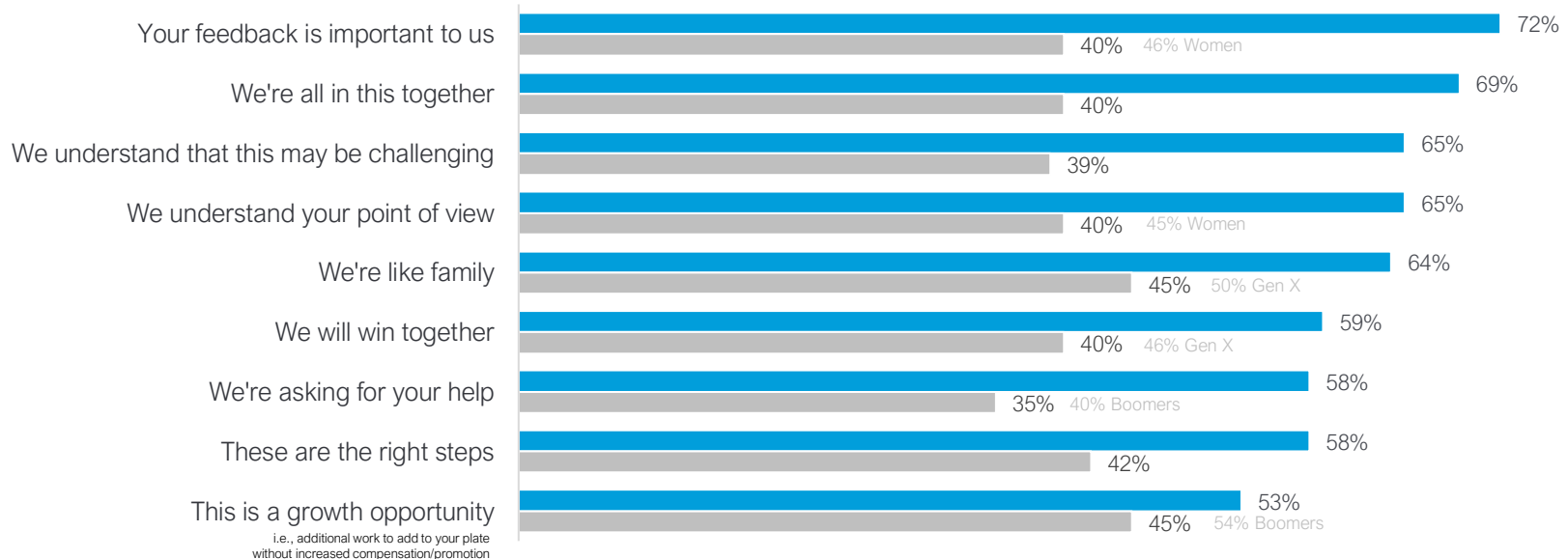




When “therapy speak” is detected by employees, they start to tune out, as they view the catchphrases as disingenuous sentiments

Has your employer used any of the following phrases before?

■ Employer used the phrase ■ Not believable to the employee





Employees are increasingly skeptical of their employers' intentions, report seeing right through the communications tactics

71%

American Workers

"I can easily **see through** my company's ingenuine friendly or empathetic tone in their communications."

76% Millennials

69%

American Workers

"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."

76% Millennials

55%

American Workers

"I feel like my employer 'listens,' but only to win arguments."

62% Millennials



“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...





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.)”

63% Millennials

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.)”



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.”

84% Millennials, Women

81%

American Workers

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

To learn more about this research, please reach out to...



Libby Rodney
Chief Strategy Officer
lr Rodney@harrispoll.com



Abbey Lunney
Managing Director
abbey.lunney@harrispoll.com



Tim Osiecki
Research Manager
tim.osiecki@harrispoll.com

HARRIS POLL THOUGHT LEADERSHIP PRACTICE

A proven approach for building credible and authentic brand authority

Building on 50+ years of experience pulsing societal opinion, we design research that is credible, creative, and culturally relevant. Give your pitches an edge with custom information designed by research experts.