

Seriously?

25 Cringe-Worthy Phrases Leaders Use
That Rob Them of Their Credibility ...
And How to Retool Them!

S A M P L E C H A P T E R S

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To our two incredible sons,
Paul and Brian, who taught us how
important credible leadership and
language are ... the hard way!
We love you and we are proud of you—
we never say it enough!

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In the end, leaders don't decide who leads. Their direct reports do. And it's striking how our language reveals the visual nature of our thoughts about what is real and about what is assumed. (James Kouzes)

Introduction

Over the years we have heard—and yes, we have to admit—even used some of the phrases outlined in this book. They are familiar, comfortable, and even fun to use by leaders and direct reports in the workplace—and in life. Unfortunately, many of these commonly-used expressions have morphed into generally accepted workplace vocabulary and have even become corporate buzzwords.

Here’s an example of what you might hear today. We’re exaggerating just a bit, but you’ll get the point:

“Listen John, you’re pushing my buttons here! I don’t have the bandwidth to search for that information with everything that’s on my plate, now that we have to do more with less. Besides, that report will probably show up in the last place I look. But hey! It is what it is! We may have to fake it till we make it at the Board meeting, but at the end of the day we could just

throw the new intern under the bus because, trust me, I don't have a choice."

Sound even remotely familiar? As leadership and team building consultants, we began looking at these phrases with a more critical eye. We asked ourselves:

- Do they really reflect the truth?
- Are they truly representative of wise counsel?
- Are they the kind of statements that help people or hinder people?
- Are they simply conventional assumptions dressed in new and trendy clothes?

Journey with us as we explore each of 25 tricky phrases we hear leaders use all the time—and in our opinion, the phrases rob leaders of their credibility. You'll discover how they're not in alignment with positive psychology and the social sciences, as well as what nuggets of truth they may contain. But even better, you'll discover a new and more powerful way to articulate the same idea, with better results.

You may feel the urge to defend many of these phrases. They are probably ones you have used in the past—or maybe even use now—without questioning their validity. We understand the temptation. These phrases are clever and spicy, and they make great sound bytes. But here's the thing:

they call attention to one of the underlying issues that has haunted leaders throughout the history of leadership:

Your leadership credibility is not so much affected by unanswered questions as it is by unquestioned answers.

You might want to read that statement again, and ponder on it a bit! Ask yourself how much of what you think you know about leadership is based on unquestioned answers. It's time to rethink what we've always believed, starting with what we say. The truth is, the phrases we've selected are misleading and superficial. They rarely represent the truth but they've been used so long they *appear* to be true—until you question them. They are the epitomes of unquestioned answers that need to be challenged. What's more, when leaders use these phrases, their credibility as leaders suffers. Why? Because these phrases are superficial—and they're just plain misleading! Superficiality doesn't breed credibility, and neither does misinformation.

We think you'll agree that for far too many leaders, the allegiance to the false security inherent in many unquestioned answers has led them and the organizations they lead to reduced market share, marginal profits, compromised cash flow during the ebb and flow of sales cycles, disengaged employees, and loss of credibility.

All of the phrases and euphemisms outlined in this book are still believed by many people to be true. But think about it. Once upon a time people, intelligent people, believed the world was flat. Of course, we now know that’s not true, and has never been true! We’ve moved beyond that particular ‘unquestioned answer’ and many other archaic assumptions.

We invite you to open your minds and hearts to what we truly believe will be transformational perspectives in the pages which follow. Your current perspectives and languaging will be challenged. Your intellectual comfort zones will be thrown off center. The weaknesses of your inherited assumptions will be exposed. But we also believe that the deeper parts of you—your intuitive intelligence, your wise self, your common sense, your authentic nature, your extraordinary leadership potential—will resonate with what we have to say.

How To Read This Book

For each “Seriously?” phrase, we’ve included the following segments:

- the assumptions behind it that make it so popular;
- why we believe it’s so important to “seriously” question it;

- a section entitled *What Leaders Can Do*, which outlines the commonsensical truth about the phrase, along with powerful leadership tips for retooling it; and
- *Here's One Way to Reframe It*, where we've taken the liberty of providing one suggestion, so you can make a conscious choice to rephrase what you are saying—and encourage your employees to rephrase what they are saying—so everyone's perspectives are more in alignment with good science and common sense.

Give yourself an opportunity to reinforce your credibility and wisdom. After reading what we have to say, we hope you'll take our perspectives to heart and discover that you may have unwittingly used many of these familiar phrases purely out of habit and convention. Your credibility will build a 'credibility culture' at work as your employees—and peers—respond to your extraordinary leadership.

If that is the conclusion you reach, and we hope it is, we invite you to choose to leave these old, stale expressions behind and remind yourself to “Seriously” get over them!

Seriously, have some fun with this book, because at the end of the day you don't have to work harder, just work smarter—because it's better late than never since you're right where you're supposed to be! And remember, practice makes perfect ... seriously?



What This Phrase Assumes

People who use this phrase usually have a prioritized list of locations in their heads where they believe the item they're looking for will most likely be. So, they believe that if they look in the most likely location first, they'll find it. When they don't find it, they seek the next probable location, and then the next, and so on. Once the item is found, they obviously stop looking, and declare that it was in the last place they looked!

Seriously?

This phrase is a perfect example of duh-ology! So, we thought we'd put this phrase in the first place you look!

Why on earth would you keep looking for something after you found it? Of course it's going to be in the last place you look, because it's always in the place you find it! If you had hindsight, you would always look in 'the last place you look' first! Right? And it's never in a place you haven't looked, if you never looked there in the first place.



It's Always in the Last Place You Look

What Leaders Can Do

This saying has always amused us. We suppose it's a very true statement but personally, once you've found what you're looking for, it would be fruitless to keep on searching for something you already have.

The euphemism itself is a prime example of 'perspicacity'—which means “stating the obvious” or “the capacity to assess situations or circumstances ‘shrewdly’ and to draw sound conclusions.” It begs the question—so, why didn't you look where you found it *in* the first place?

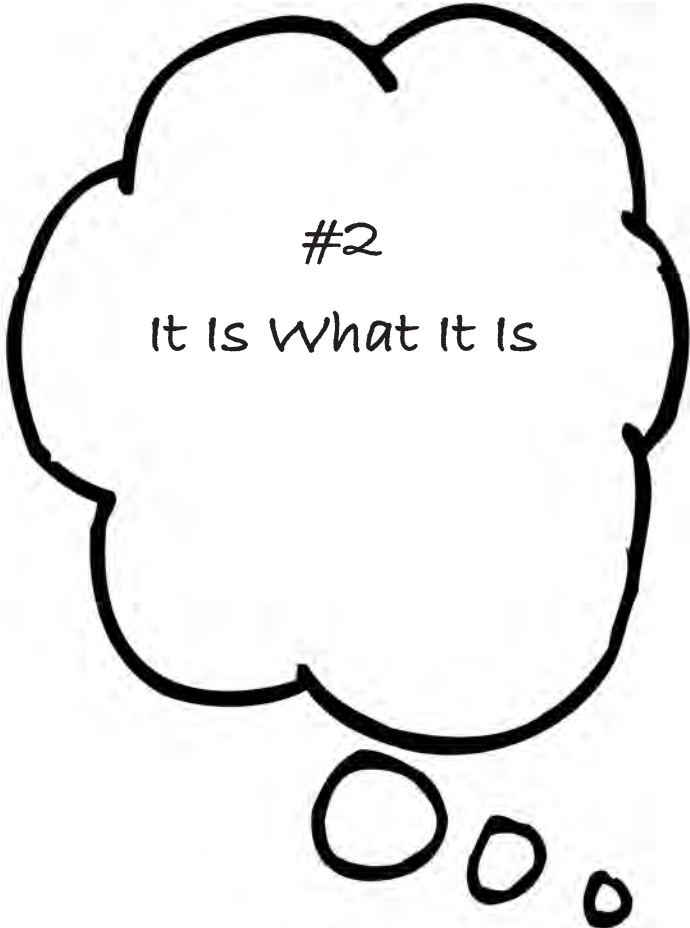
This comical saying has actually produced a clever high tech solution. The Wuvo Spot is a mobile app that keeps track of items you never want to lose, whether it's your wallet, your laptop, your keys or anything that's important to you.

You might wonder why we are including this phrase in a leadership book. It's because, according to research, people (including leaders) waste up to seven hours a week just hunting for things! Seven hours a week! Seriously?

Here's a very practical leadership tip related to this particular phrase, which can be a big timesaver for all your folks: Once you find the item and use it, put it back in the **first** place you looked for it, since that's where you thought it belonged!

Here's One Way to Reframe It





What This Phrase Assumes

Certain phrases seem to creep into our business vocabulary without us hardly even noticing. Before we know it, everyone's saying it, and it becomes a regular part of how we respond to situations on the job or at home.

The phrase '*It is what it is*' appears to mean 'the situation is out of my control and I have no choice but to accept it and move on.' In other words, people take it to be a confirmation that whatever 'it' is has a permanent quality that makes it uniquely out of the range of our ability to control it.

The message suggests that things are what they are. Whatever the 'it' was is unpreventable. It's just the way things are. We just need to accept it. We don't need to expect things to be any different. That's life. And I'm okay with that. I'll handle it as best I can.

Seriously?

The phrase *'It is what it is'* is popping up in increasing frequency in everyday business conversations. We hear it in leadership meetings, in coaching sessions, during training classes, and even interspersed into presentations presented by key executives during Town Hall Meetings with all employees. Sometimes the phrase appears nonsensical; other times, it seems to indicate that we have no control over a situation. Most times the phrase suggests that there's no action that can be taken, even when some kind of action is both possible and preferable.

In some contexts it can indicate an acceptance of complexity and ambiguity, while in other contexts it can indicate an acceptance of limitations. It's a phrase that has many shades and meanings. But the overall reasoning behind the saying seems to be it's not something you have control over. It is what it is.

We encourage you to be aware of the deeper meaning you convey to your people when you use this particular phrase, because the minute you say it, you give up your power and sabotage your credibility as a leader. You give the impression of an ostrich, burying its head in the sand. You are giving away your control and admitting a total lack of power over the situation.



It Is What It Is

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What Leaders Can Do

There's been a cultural shift towards all things Zen — accepting what is, being happy no matter what the circumstances, expressing gratitude for your blessings, and greeting irritating situations and people with a compassionate smile. The phrase “*It is what it is*” has invaded business vernacular as much as it has private conversations.

This phrase does have a kernel of truth. There are many things you can't control, and it makes sense to accept rather than rail against what you can't change. But seriously? You're telling us you have no amount of control related to the situation at all?

Here's the problem: This phrase abdicates your responsibility, shuts down creative problem solving, and concedes defeat. A leader who uses the expression is a leader who faces challenges, fails to overcome them, and explains away the episodes as inevitable, unavoidable forces of circumstances. Unfortunately, leaders with this mindset will lose their credibility.

In our opinion, one of the critical skills a leader must develop is the ability to identify options. Being able to look at a situation from several different angles, then forming alternatives for action, will help you maintain your confidence, inspire your people, and always stay in control—no matter what. Plus, it's a great skill to teach your people.

Here's One Way to Reframe It



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