The Politeness Scale

SEVEN WORKPLACE SITUATIONS, FIVE LEVELS OF ENGLISH POLITENESS.

English With Mack.

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Introduction

Every sentence in English sits somewhere on a scale from blunt to indirect. The same intent can be expressed at any point on that scale, and the small grammatical choices you make, modal verbs, hedges, past tense, qualifiers, are what move it.

This guide takes seven workplace situations and shows the same idea at five levels of politeness, from blunt to maximally indirect. Under each phrase, a short note names the specific grammatical softener that was added or removed. Pick the level that fits the audience and the stakes.

Mack's note. Match a CEO with level four or five. Match a close peer with level two or three. Use level one almost never.

I. Making a request

You want a colleague to send you a file by Thursday.

1 BLUNT: "Send me the file." Imperative with no softener. Reads as a command.

2 DIRECT: "Could you send me the file?" Adds the modal could. The single most important softener in English.

3 NEUTRAL: "Could you send me the file by Thursday?" Adds a deadline. Standard professional register.

4 POLITE: "Could you send me the file by Thursday, when you get a chance?" Softens the deadline without weakening it.

5 INDIRECT: "I was wondering if you might be able to send the file at some point this week?" Past tense, modal of possibility, vague window.

II. Disagreeing with someone

You think the proposed timeline is too aggressive.

1 BLUNT: "That timeline is wrong." Flat assertion. Reads as personal criticism.

2 DIRECT: "I don't think that timeline is realistic." Owns the disagreement as your view.

3 NEUTRAL: "I'm not sure that timeline is realistic." Suggests doubt rather than firm opposition.

4 POLITE: "I wonder if that timeline might be a bit ambitious." Adds I wonder if, modal might, hedge a bit.

5 INDIRECT: "I was wondering whether it might be worth taking another look at the timeline, just to make sure we're being realistic." Past tense, double modal, suggestion framed as a question.

III. Refusing a request

A colleague asked you to take on extra work this week, and you cannot.

1 BLUNT: "No, I can't." Flat refusal with no softener and no reason.

2 DIRECT: "I can't take this on this week." Drops the no, adds the timeframe.

3 NEUTRAL: "Unfortunately, I can't take this on this week." The single highest-leverage softener for refusals.

4 POLITE: "I'd love to help, but I'm fully booked this week. Could we look at next week?" Refuses without closing the door.

5 INDIRECT: "I really wish I could, but I'm not going to be able to get to it this week. Would it help if we talked about how to find someone who could?" Maximum warmth on a no.

IV. Giving negative feedback

A colleague's draft has a confusing structure that needs reworking.

1 BLUNT: "The structure of this is bad." Reads as a verdict.

2 DIRECT: "I think the structure needs work." Descriptive and fixable.

3 NEUTRAL: "The structure isn't quite landing for me. Want to talk through it?" Owns the reaction as yours.

4 POLITE: "There's a lot to like here. One thing I'd push you on is the structure, which I think we could rework together." Frames the fix as joint work.

5 INDIRECT: "I really enjoyed reading this. I wonder if it might be worth talking through the structure of the middle section, just to see if there's a tighter version of it." Maximum positive lead-in.

V. Delivering bad news

A project the team worked on for months has been cancelled.

1 BLUNT: "The project is cancelled." No acknowledgement of impact.

2 DIRECT: "I have to share some difficult news. The project has been cancelled." Adds a one-line warning.

3 NEUTRAL: "I want to share some difficult news. The leadership team has decided to cancel the project, effective immediately." Adds the source and timing.

4 POLITE: "I have some difficult news to share, and I want to give it to you directly. The leadership team has decided to cancel the project. I know this won't be easy to hear." Acknowledges audience investment.

5 INDIRECT: "I wanted to come to you in person before this gets shared more widely. After a lot of deliberation, leadership has reached the difficult decision to cancel the project. I'd like to talk through what happens next when you're ready." Maximum care.

VI. Asking a sensitive question

You want to ask whether a colleague is planning to leave the company.

1 BLUNT: "Are you leaving?" Direct question with no preparation.

2 DIRECT: "Can I ask if you're thinking about leaving?" Permission to ask, gentler verb.

3 NEUTRAL: "I want to ask you something difficult. Are you thinking about leaving?" Explicit warning the question is hard.

4 POLITE: "I hope this isn't out of line, but I wanted to ask you directly: are you considering a move?" Permission-seeking, gentler verb.

5 INDIRECT: "I've been wondering whether the timing might be right to have a conversation about where you see yourself in the next year. I'd rather hear it from you, whatever the answer is." Embedded in an invitation to talk.

VII. Pushing back on a senior person

You think your manager's proposed approach will not work.

1 BLUNT: "That won't work." Reads as insubordination.

2 DIRECT: "I'd push back on that." Owns the disagreement as a perspective.

3 NEUTRAL: "Help me understand the reasoning. From where I sit, I'm not sure it will work." Asks for reasoning before pushing back.

4 POLITE: "I want to make sure I'm not missing something. From my angle, there are a couple of risks I'd want to talk through before we go ahead." Frames the disagreement as risks.

5 INDIRECT: "I might be wrong on this, but I wanted to flag a couple of things that have been on my mind, just so we can talk them through before we commit." Maximum diplomacy.

"The dial is not the message. It is how the message arrives. Choose it deliberately, and almost any sentence becomes the right one."

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