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What the #%@&!?: The problem of profanity in the workplace



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In the nineties, [James V. O'Connor](#) became fed up with the amount of [swearing](#) that he heard—in the [media](#), in public places, in the [office](#), and even from his own mouth. In response to what he considered to be a general decline in cultural civility, the public relations veteran decided to write a self-help book, [Cuss Control: The Complete Book on How to Curb Your Cursing](#), to help himself and others adopt alternative forms of [verbal expression](#). While writing Cuss Control, O'Connor also created the [Cuss Control Academy](#) and soon began receiving invitations to speak to employees at various businesses about the effects that foul language can have in the office.

Is profanity at work really such a bad thing?

"The real problem in the workplace is that swearing in general typically is negative: It's complaining, criticizing, blaming people, name calling, being hostile and belligerent as opposed to cooperating and trying to solve the problems that occur everyday that make people want to swear," said O'Connor. "In the good old days, you did the mature and professional thing when you had conflicts with somebody or there was a challenge you were facing. You may have been angry and upset, but you just dealt with it. Now people feel free to let it fly."

But, sometimes, I asked him, don't you just have to say "F-it" and get something off of your chest?

The answer is yes—sometimes. But the problem, according to O'Connor, is that people don't just use bad language some of the time. It has become a ubiquitous way of communicating frustration and because we use profanity so often, it doesn't pack quite the punch we intend when we say these words. Take the S-word for example. O'Connor points out during his seminars that because we use it so much, it can be applied to all of the five senses (i.e., "I feel like s***," "You look like s***," "This tastes like s***," etc.).

"There are a lot of situations where the word is used out of lazy language because we can't think of the right word," he said. "S*** will always do and it's also abrasive and negative."

Equally overused is the F-word because we can utilize it as a noun, verb, or adjective. Although more abrasive than the S-word, it does not really express anything—nor does it emphasize our point when we use it too often.

"If you are the boss and you get upset and use the F-word, people are going to jump," O'Connor said. "If you use that word all the time, it's like 'there he goes again' and it loses its impact."

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How to curb cussing in the office

Although O'Connor believes that most people—unless they are deeply religious—cannot completely eliminate profane language from their personal lexicon, there are ways that we can control our cussing.

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Admit there is a problem. While you may really think that cursing is no big deal, the only way to keep it under control is to recognize that it might make you look bad among your peers. Excessive profanity can have a negative effect on your relationships at work and, in some extreme cases, can even get you fired. If you actually take into consideration how people view you when you curse, it may help you slow down your salty language.

"If you've been in a situation at work where someone was ranting, raving, and swearing, it creates a lot of discomfort and what is referred to as a hostile environment," O'Connor said. "It just makes people very tense. Maybe you feel good because you got to yell and swear, but the people around you are basically the innocent victims."

Deal with your stress in a more productive manner. One piece of advice that O'Connor gives during seminars is for employees to "cope, not cuss." The temporary feeling of relief is not worth the lasting impression that people can get when you use a lot of profane language.

"We all have problems and stress but be professional, deal with it, and solve the problem," he said. "The trick to not swearing is to really learn how to control your emotions and your attitude. If you have emotional control and a positive attitude, you're not only going to avoid swearing, you're going to come across as very professional."

Practice makes patience. O'Connor admits that much of his own swearing is the result of impatience—particularly when he's driving. In order to control this, he began to actively think about why he was getting so angry at other people on the road and made a concerted effort to ignore the bad driving that upset him so much.

In the workplace, O'Connor suggests that you plan parts of your day in advance—such as how long it realistically takes to get lunch, including your wait on line in the cafeteria. Once you get a realistic idea of how long your daily activities will take, you are less likely to get angry when they do not occur fast enough for your liking. Also, changing your thinking in this way can make you a generally more pleasant and happy person.

"The key thing really is attitude. You've got to have a positive attitude to survive in the world and to survive with other people," said O'Connor. "You just have to think positively and deal with discomforts and aggravations as they come."

This article originally appeared on my [Workplace Communication Examiner](#) page on June 30, 2009.

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Posted by Kenya McCullum at [August 29, 2010](#)

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[September 18, 2010](#) COM101: The Communication Corner wrote:
For as long as I can remember, I have enjoyed the SciFi Channel's marathons of "The Twilight Zone"—including the one from last week's long holiday weekend. There are many lessons about life that Rod Serling taught us through the show, including some that can help you get along in the workplace. 1. When you work with the public, sometimes you really need to drink. Henry Corwin is a drunken department store Santa Claus with a broken spirit. In order to cope with rude customers and their insatiable need to acquire material possessions, Corwin bends his ...

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