



ESL Podcast 15 – Problems at the Office

GLOSSARY

to pick (someone's) brain – to get someone's thoughts on a certain topic; to ask someone else to help one think of a solution to a problem

* Dominique trusted her sister's opinion and she always picked her brain when she needed advice.

sticky situation – difficult circumstances; a situation that is difficult to handle

* Lisa was in a sticky situation at work and she did not know how to fix the problems she had created.

input – ideas or opinions one adds, often in a discussion; suggestions one gives

* Angelo is the sort of person who is always a little too quick to give others his input on solving their problems.

tactful – able to say things in a way that prevents people from getting upset; able to know how to behave in an uncomfortable or difficult circumstance

* Stephanie was not a very tactful person and frequently said things that made people angry.

(ones/someone's) two cents – one's/someone's opinion; one's/someone's thoughts or ideas on a certain topic

* When Giovanni's friend had a problem, he gave her his two cents and let her know what he thought she should do to fix it.

now and then – occasionally; sometimes, but not always

* Aiko enjoys sweets now and then, but it is not her favorite type of food.

to go too far – to continue with an action or behavior beyond what is needed or wanted, causing problems or negative results

* Tony likes to joke around, but he goes too far sometimes and teases people until they get upset.

to cut and paste – to take part of a document or image and make it part of a second document or image, creating one final product

* Someone had clearly tried to cut and paste two images together, but it was obvious that the new photo was a fake.

unflattering – making something or someone appear worse than normal

* Deja's description of what happened was very unflattering to her friends and made them seem not only silly, but also mean.



ESL Podcast 15 – Problems at the Office

harmless – not causing a negative result; unable to hurt or harm

* The big dog looked frightening, but it was harmless and would never hurt anyone.

to keep it to (oneself) – to not share something with other people; to keep a thought, comment, or information secret

* Wendell knew his opinion was unpopular, so he kept it to himself.

top brass – the most powerful managers in an organization or company

* The top brass have made some very important decisions about the company's future.

to not know when to quit – to not know when to stop doing an action before causing problems, damage, or other negative results

* Bailey continued to call her ex-boyfriend months after their relationship ended because she just didn't know when to quit.

clueless – unaware; without knowledge or understanding

* Jamison does not mean to say cruel things, but he is clueless about how to talk to people.

tough one – a difficult problem; a bad situation without an easy solution

* Nadine wanted to help her friend with his problem, but it was a tough one, and she did not know what to say.

to cut it out – to quit doing something; to stop doing something, usually when that action has a negative result

* Harold's brother kept bothering him while he was studying and would not cut it out even when Harold said he would tell their mother.



ESL Podcast 15 – Problems at the Office

CULTURE NOTE

Taking the Moral High Ground

“To take the moral high ground” means to keep one’s beliefs and to behave according to what is generally accepted as a high standard of good and correct behavior. When we talk about “morality” (noun) or “moral” (adjective) behavior, we are talking about our “principles” (important beliefs) about what is right and wrong, and what is good or bad.

“High ground” is the term we use for a place or piece of land that is higher than the areas around it. That’s where you want to be if there is a “flood” (too much water over land), so you can stay dry. A person who has or takes the moral high ground in a debate or controversy is someone who has or wants to have the better moral position when compared to others involved, whether it’s “in their own eyes” (from their own point of view) or in the eyes of others. If, for example, people at work are trying to “curry favor” (get someone to like them more by trying to please that person) with the boss by telling lies about their coworkers, you may want to take the moral high ground and not do the same thing, even if it means you will not gain the same advantage as your coworkers.

The opposite of taking the moral high ground is “to sink to (someone’s) level.” “To sink” means to fall or to drop to a lower level. “To sink to (someone’s) level” means to lower one’s standards so that one behaves in a way that is similar to another person who has lower standards. For instance, if you’re in car race and one of the racers “routinely” (regularly) wins by “paying off” (giving money to someone so they’ll do or not do something) his competitors, you might say, “I won’t sink to his level to win.”

So people who take the moral high ground are people who won’t sink to the level of others. We often think highly or well of people who take the moral high ground, especially if it means there is some “sacrifice” (giving up of something important) on their part.



ESL Podcast 15 – Problems at the Office

COMPLETE TRANSCRIPT

Welcome to English as a Second Language Podcast number 15 – Problems at the Office.

This is English as a Second Language Podcast episode 15. I'm your host, Dr. Jeff McQuillan, coming to you from the Center for Educational Development in beautiful Los Angeles, California.

Today's podcast is about problems at work. Lucy and I are going to talk about a problem that Lucy had at work and how we thought she should solve the problem. Listen to our conversation and then I'll talk about some of the expressions that we used. Let's get started

[start of dialogue]

Lucy: Hey Jeff, can I pick your brain for a minute?

Jeff: Sure, what's up?

Lucy: Well, I have a sticky situation at work and I wanted to get your input. You're always so tactful.

Jeff: Thanks. I'm not sure I can help but I'll give you my two cents.

Lucy: Well, it's like this. There's this guy I work with who is always making jokes about the boss. Don't get me wrong. I like a good joke now and then, especially about the boss. But, sometimes he goes too far.

Jeff. What do you mean?

Lucy: Well, just the other day, he got a picture off the Internet and cut and pasted the boss's head onto it. Let's just say it was a very unflattering picture of him.

Jeff: Hmm. That's really unprofessional, but it sounds harmless enough, if he kept it to himself or just showed it to a few friends.

Lucy: That's just it. He didn't keep it to himself. He attached the picture to an email and sent it to the entire company, including the top brass.

Jeff: You're joking, right?



ESL Podcast 15 – Problems at the Office

Lucy: No, I'm not. This is what I meant when I said he goes too far. He just doesn't know when to quit.

Jeff: Is he a friend of yours?

Lucy: No, not really. But, I don't want the guy to get fired. He's actually a good person. He's just clueless, that's all.

Jeff: Well, that's a tough one. Let me think about it. Maybe there's a way to get him to cut it out before he gets fired.

Lucy: Thanks. I appreciate it.

Jeff: Oh, it's no big deal. Let's go get a bite to eat.

Lucy: Sure. Sounds good to me.

[end of dialogue]

Our dialogue begins with Lucy saying to me, "Hey Jeff." "Hey" is an informal way of saying "hi" or "hello." She says, "Hey Jeff, can I pick your brain for a minute?" "To pick (pick) someone's brain" means to get their opinion, to get their advice, to ask them what they think. Lucy wants to pick my brain for a minute, which means for short time, not necessarily just 60 seconds.

I say, "Sure," meaning, "yes." "What's up?" meaning what is the problem? What is going on? Lucy says, "Well, I have a sticky situation at work." When we say something is a "sticky (sticky) situation," we mean it's a difficult situation, a situation that is possibly embarrassing or difficult for someone to talk about. We might also describe it as a sensitive situation. Lucy wants to get my input on this problem. Your "input" (input) is your opinion of something, your advice about something. Lucy says that "I am always so tactful." "To be tactful" (tactful)" means to be polite, to always say the right thing, to never insult anyone – someone who's very good with words who doesn't ever cause problems with other people, who never makes other people upset. We could describe that person as being tactful.

Obviously, Lucy doesn't know me very well. I'm not very tactful at all. But, this is just a story, so, we'll imagine that I am tactful. I say, "Thanks! I'm not sure I can help but I'll give you my two cents." "To give someone their two cents" means to give them your opinion. It's the same, basically, as "input." It's an informal



ESL Podcast 15 – Problems at the Office

expression. “Two cents” is not worth very much money, so the expression implies the idea that yes I will give you my opinion, but it might not be worth very much. It might not be very useful to you. You’re being humble. You’re saying, I don’t really know very much but I will try to help you.

Lucy says, “Well, it’s like this,” which is an informal way of saying here’s the situation. Here’s the description of the situation. She says, “There’s this guy I work with who’s always making jokes about the boss.” The “boss” would be the leader, the head of their group or their company. She says, “Don’t get me wrong.” That expression “don’t get me wrong,” is used when you want to say to someone “Don’t misunderstand me.” “Don’t get the wrong idea.” We use it when we’re going to say something that a person might interpret incorrectly. When we say something to someone who may think, “Oh, that’s a bad thing,” or “You’re saying something bad,” we use this expression “Don’t get me wrong.” So, “listen carefully and wait until I finish my explanation.” That’s another way of describing the meaning of this expression.

Lucy says, “I like a good joke now and then.” “Now and then” means every once in a while, occasionally. She says she likes a good joke especially about the boss. “But sometimes he goes too far.” “To go too far” means to do something that would normally be okay, but to do too much of it, to do it in such a way that it hurts other people or it bothers other people, that’s to go too far. This “guy” at work – and “guy” in the singular is always, or almost always a man – goes too far in making jokes about the boss. He says things that could make the boss or other people in the office angry or upset.

I ask, “What do you mean? And Lucy gives an example of him going too far. She says, “Well, just the other day,” meaning just a few days ago or recently, “he got a picture off the Internet and cut and pasted the boss’ head on to it.” So this guy at Lucy’s work downloaded a picture from the Internet and then using some sort of special software, perhaps Photoshop, he put the head of the boss – a picture of the head of the boss – on this photograph. We don’t know what the photograph was exactly, but we can guess that it was something funny.

Lucy says, “Let’s just say it was a very unflattering picture of him.” The expression “Let’s just say” is used when you don’t want to give the exact details. You don’t want to go into a very detailed description of something. You just want to give the person an idea what you’re talking, about a general idea of what you are talking about. That’s when we would use this expression “Let’s just say.” Not wanting to describe the picture in detail, Lucy says “Let’s just say it was a very unflattering picture of him.” “To flatter” (flatter), as a verb, means to say something nice about someone. “Unflattering” as an adjective, would be



ESL Podcast 15 – Problems at the Office

something that is not nice, something that doesn't complement that person, something that makes that person look bad.

Jeff says – that's me – “Hmm. That sounds really unprofessional.” Notice again the prefix “un.” “Un” means not. So, when I say that's really “unprofessional,” I mean that's not professional. That's not something you should do in a work environment. “But,” I say, “it sounds” – it appears – “harmless enough.” “To be harmless” (harmless) means to not cause any problems, to not be very serious, to not cause any injury or damage. I say that the picture is harmless enough, meaning it's no big deal. “If,” I say, “he kept it to himself or showed it to a few friends.” So, it's harmless enough only if this guy kept it to himself, meaning he didn't show anyone else or only showed it, only gave it to, a few friends.

Lucy says, “That's just it.” That expression “that's just it” means now you've identified the problem. You've said something that indicates the problem and now I'm going to tell you what that is. Lucy continues, “He didn't keep it to himself. He attached the picture to an email and sent it to the entire company, including the top brass.” So, this guy at Lucy's work sent the picture via email, using email, to everyone in the company, including the top brass. “The top brass” are the bosses, the people who run the entire company. If it's a large company, you may have several different levels of bosses. The top brass would be the most important ones – the president, the vice president and so forth.

I then say, “You're joking, right?” I am asking if Lucy is making a joke, if she's just kidding. She says, “No, I'm not. This is what I mean when I said he goes too far. He just doesn't know when to quit” – when to stop, when not to go too far. Jeff says, “Is he a friend of yours?” Lucy says, “No, not really, but I don't want the guy to get fired.” “To get fired” means to lose your job.

“He's actually a good person. He's just clueless. That's all.” “To be clueless” (clueless) means to not understand really what's going on, someone who is ignorant, someone who doesn't quite understand the implications of everything he says or does. That would be someone who is clueless. Notice also the suffix (less), which comes at the end of this word. It means without. Before, we had the word “harmless,” meaning without harm. Here, we have “clueless,” meaning without a clue, without an idea.

I say, “Well, that's a tough one.” That's a difficult situation. “Let me think about it. Maybe there's a way to get him to cut it out before he gets fired.” “To cut something out” is a two-word phrasal verb meaning to stop, to no longer do it, especially when we're talking about something you shouldn't be doing anyway, something that's bad. Lucy says to me, “Thanks, I appreciate it.” I say “Oh, it's no



ESL Podcast 15 – Problems at the Office

big deal.” It's not something that she needs to thank me for. “Let's go get a bite to eat,” I say. “To go get a bite (bite) to eat” means to go and get some food, to go to lunch or to go to dinner. Lucy says, “Sure, sounds good to me,” meaning yes, that's a good idea.

Now let's listen to the dialogue, this time at a normal speed.

[start of dialogue]

Lucy: Hey Jeff, can I pick your brain for a minute?

Jeff: Sure, what's up?

Lucy: Well, I have a sticky situation at work and I wanted to get your input. You're always so tactful.

Jeff: Thanks. I'm not sure I can help but I'll give you my two cents.

Lucy: Well, it's like this. There's this guy I work with who is always making jokes about the boss. Don't get me wrong. I like a good joke now and then, especially about the boss. But, sometimes he goes too far.

Jeff. What do you mean?

Lucy: Well, just the other day, he got a picture off the Internet and cut and pasted the boss's head onto it. Let's just say it was a very unflattering picture of him.

Jeff: Hmm. That's really unprofessional, but it sounds harmless enough, if he kept it to himself or just showed it to a few friends.

Lucy: That's just it. He didn't keep it to himself. He attached the picture to an email and sent it to the entire company, including the top brass.

Jeff: You're joking, right?

Lucy: No, I'm not. This is what I meant when I said he goes too far. He just doesn't know when to quit.

Jeff: Is he a friend of yours?

Lucy: No, not really. But, I don't want the guy to get fired. He's actually a good



ESL Podcast 15 – Problems at the Office

person. He's just clueless, that's all.

Jeff: Well, that's a tough one. Let me think about it. Maybe there's a way to get him to cut it out before he gets fired.

Lucy: Thanks. I appreciate it.

Jeff: Oh, it's no big deal. Let's go get a bite to eat.

Lucy: Sure. Sounds good to me.

[end of dialogue]

Thanks to our wonderful scriptwriter, Dr. Lucy Tse, for her wonderful script.

From Los Angeles, California, I'm Jeff McQuillan. Thank you for listening. Come back and listen to us again right here on ESL Podcast.

English as a Second Language Podcast is written and produced by Dr. Lucy Tse, hosted by Dr. Jeff McQuillan. This podcast is copyright 2006 by the Center for Educational Development.