4 MINUTE READ

One of your coworkers brings you a completed project for a once-over. You give it a quick glance, and your stomach immediately plummets into your shoes. This is wrong. Not an "oopsies, you're missing a comma" sort of wrong, more of a "whoa, you need to re-do this" type of situation.

Now what? You know that you definitely can't just let that mistake slide by. "If you ignore it, it's likely to continue," says Janel Anderson, a leadership and communication expert who earned her PhD in organizational communication from Purdue University. "I always encourage people to have these tough conversations in service of the great work their organization or team is doing."

So, how do you do this? How exactly can you break the news and tell your colleague, "You screwed up!" in a way that's direct, but not condescending?

Whether you're interacting with a brand-new hire, a peer, a direct report, or even your boss, needing to tell someone they messed up is always awkward. Fortunately, there are a few phrases you can lean on to lead them in the right direction–without being totally brutal.

1. "COULD YOU TAKE ANOTHER LOOK AT [THING]?"

Despite the fact that your insides are screaming, Wrong, wrong, wrong!, you know that a harsh correction probably won't be well-received.

That's the great thing about starting with a question. It immediately puts you and that other person in a more collaborative frame of mind, while gently guiding them to the area (or areas) where they've made some mistakes.

Plus, having that person turn their attention to the specific spots where they've messed up gives them a chance to recognize (and address) their own errors–without you just wildly redlining everything. That opportunity to be a little more hands-on with their fixes means they're more likely to actually retain that information for next time.

One important thing to note about this approach: You need to be specific about exactly what they need to address. "It's obviously something they missed the first time," says Anderson. "So, say something like, 'Could you take another look at paragraph three or slide seven?'" That way, you can direct them to the exact places that require their attention.

What this looks like: "Could you take another look at the calculation for the percent change column in this month's website traffic spreadsheet?"

2. "WHOOPS, I'VE SCREWED [THING] UP BEFORE TOO!"

No matter how kind someone is with their delivery, being on the receiving end of negative feedback or required revisions can still feel like an attack on you and your work. You've been there, right?

One way to soften the blow of your criticism is by grouping yourself in with that person. That's exactly what a statement like this one does (even if it is a white lie). Your correction will feel way more supportive and less domineering–while still directly calling their attention to the spots that need improvement.

"This helps put that person in a less vulnerable position, because you're making yourself a little vulnerable too," Anderson explains. "You're saying, 'Let me help you learn from my mistakes.'"

One way to take this response to the next level? Offer any tips or resources you used to correct your own blunder when you made it.

What this looks like: "Whoops, I've screwed the percent change column up before, too! It looks like all of these results need to be fixed, because you ran the calculation with the values in the wrong order. I'll send you this handy online calculator I use to double-check my own math. Let me know if you have any questions."

3. "[THING] NEEDS TO BE FIXED. HOW CAN I HELP?"

By now you know that you want to be a few things when telling someone they messed up: direct, supportive, and non-accusatory. Well, this response is all of those things.

"When things get to a point where the person could get defensive really quickly, I recommend taking all personal pronouns out," Anderson says. Removing the finger-pointing "you" language helps you to keep your correction focused on the work–as opposed to the perceived shortcomings of a specific person.

Follow that with a sincere question asking how you can assist them (you can add personal pronouns back in now!). Maybe they'll take you up on your willingness to help, or maybe they'll retreat to their desk to implement your feedback alone. Either way, just extending the offer goes a long way to show that you're there to support them–and not just chastise them.

What this looks like: "The percent change column needs to be fixed. It looks like the values were in the wrong order for the calculations. How can I help you make this update?"

There's one thing you'll notice in each of these three responses: They're all polite and friendly, but they're still direct.

Traditional wisdom might tell you to sandwich your constructive feedback between two compliments. But, ultimately, that just adds confusion and sends that person on an emotional roller coaster–thinking they did great work only to find out later that they majorly bungled the project.

Lean on these three different responses to tell someone they screwed up and you'll point them in the right direction, kindly. Because you can be straightforward without being completely brutal.

This article originally appeared on The Muse and is reprinted with permission.

More from The Muse:

- Here's how to address a not-so-self-aware coworker

- Here's a better (and less whiny) way to say "That's not my job"

- 5 ways you're being condescending at work (without realizing it)