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Politicians know the importance of messaging. “Officialese”, or “打官腔” (dǎ guānqiāng, mouthing officialese), refers to the practice by which officials obfuscate any substance behind bureaucratic blather. The basic characteristics of officialese can be summarized in one three-character phrase — 假大空 (jiǎ dà kōng, fake, grandiose, empty), referring to boastful but hollow words.

It may seem inefficient to talk in this manner, but it can be pretty handy when you don't want to get things done. Here's a quick guide.

1 Flattery and formality

If a person is mouthing officialese, you should not expect to hear anything from their heart. Of course, one will usually address important people by their correct title, such as president or doctor, but one classic cue is the use of the title “teacher” (老师 *lǎoshī*). In many cases, such a person may not even be an actual teacher. But bureaucrats may call anyone they want to flatter “teacher” as a way to give face.

Teacher Li, nice to meet you! I've long heard of your reputation, just like thunder reverberating in my ears!

Li *lǎoshī*, nín hǎo! Jiǔyǎng dà míng, rú léi guàn'ěr!

李老师,您好!久仰大名,如雷贯耳!

Teacher Wang, to have met you is the best luck I've had in three lives!

Wáng *lǎoshī*, rènshi nín zhēnshì sān shēng yǒuxìng!

王老师,认识您真是三生有幸!

2 Respect for institutional structures

When certain officials speak, words like “organization”, “leader” and “relevant authorities” always linger on their lips. Regardless of what they are talking about, the bureaucracy is ultimately responsible for resolving any hurt feelings. Ask for a favor and they will likely try to help by referring you to a greater power:

We attach great importance to the problem you reported. The company will surely give you a satisfactory reply.

Wǒmen duì nǐ huibào de wèntí shí fèn zhòngshì, gōngsī yíding huì gěi nǐ yīgè mǎnyì de dáfu.

我们对你汇报的问题十分重视,公司一定会给你一个满意的答复。

After waiting patiently, you find there is no reply forthcoming. Inquire again and you will be told:

We are in the process of handling it.

Wǒmen zhèngzài chǔlǐ.

我们正在处理。

We have learned about your situation, but we need to report it to higher authorities.

Wǒmen duì nǐ de qíngkuàng yíjīng liǎojiěle, dàn hái xūyào qǐngshàngjí lǐngdǎo.

我们对你的情况已经了解了,但还需要请示上级领导。

Eventually, it turns out that the “higher authorities” can't provide a solution, either.

The art of empty talk

Politicians are masters of ‘officialese’, boastful phrases aimed at pleasing followers and warning off rivals



Your opinion is fully respected. But the leaders also have their own difficulties. We need to build up mutual understanding.

Wǒmen hěn zūnzhòng nǐ de yìjiàn. Dàn lǐngdǎo yěyǒu lǐngdǎo de nánchǔ. Dàjiā dōu yào xiānghù lǐjiě.

我们很尊重你的意见。但领导也有领导的难处。大家都要相互理解。In addition, figuring out who is responsible for what requires sorting through a morass of titles and organizations that all sound alike. Good luck with your problem, Teacher Zhao!

3 Working for them is an honor

It's very different if the shoe is on the other foot, though. When a leader wants something done, he will arrange it very straightforwardly, ideally making it seem as if making the request is a great favor.

It's decided that you will take full charge of this matter. You should cherish this opportunity to prove yourself.

Zhè jiàn shì jiù jiāo gěi nǐ quánquán fuzé. Nǐ yào zhēnxī jīhuì, hǎo hào biǎoxiàn.

这件事就交给你全权负责。你要珍惜机会,好好表现。

Of course, orders must be obeyed. And any resistance can be countermanded by appealing to one's sense of responsibility.

If there is a problem, solve it. Don't back down from a challenge.

Yǒu wèntí jiù qù jiějué wèntí, gōngzuò bù yào yǒu wéinán qíngxù.

有问题就去解决问题,工作不要有畏难情绪。



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guānqiāng, officialese

The harder the task, the more we need someone to stand out.

Rènwù yuè jiǎnjù, jiù yuè xūyào yǒurén zhàn chūlái.

任务越艰巨,就越需要有人站出来。

4 Offer token support

While leaders always appear supportive, it is usually just lip service.

If you have any request, just bring it up. The company will try its best to satisfy you.

Yǒu shé me yāoqiú kěyǐ tí, gōngsī huì jìnli bāng nǐ jiějué.

有什么要求可以提,公司会尽力帮你解决。

Everyone has faith in you. We will all fully cooperate with your work.

Dàjiā dōu duì nǐ yǒu xìnxīn. Wǒmen dūhuì quánlì pèihé nǐ de gōngzuò.

大家都对你有信心。我们都会全力配合你的工作。

Those who are not senior may think their task is pointless or not worth doing. But leaders are there to remind you that your lowly status matters.

When you do something, you shouldn't be overambitious. You must keep your feet on the ground.

Zuòshì bùnéng hào gāowùyuǎn, yào jiǎotàshídi.

做事不能好高骛远,要脚踏实地。

Work only varies in its duties, not its prestige.

Gōngzuò zhīyǒu fēn gōng bùtóng, méiyǒu gāodī guìjiàn zhī fēn.

工作只有分工不同,没有高低贵贱之分。

5 Excuses, excuses

Those who work for a leader who is well versed in the art of empty talk can look forward to lots of effort and little reward. This can seem unfair, and may prompt some to complain. If so, they should prepare to get schooled in the art of the excuse. The first that usually comes up is an appeal to precedent.

Everyone goes through this. Why should you be different?

Dàjiā dōu shì zhème guòlái de, zěnme nǐ jiù bùxíng?

大家都是这么过来的,怎么你就不行?

But if the precedent is actually in your favor, then it will transpire that things have changed; and maybe you ought to as well!

That was then, this is now. We need to consider the situation case by case.

Cí yíshí, bǐ yíshí, wǒmen yào jùtǐ wèntí jùtǐ fēnxī.

此一时,彼一时,我们要具体问题具体分析。

6 Vague metaphors, classical allusions

Maybe you're not the type of subordinate to be placated by platitudes. Still, there's not an official out there without a mental catalog of old sayings and obscure metaphors handy for any situation.

A single strand of silk is not a thread; a single tree does not a forest make.

Dān sī bùchéng xiàn, dú mù bùchéng lín.

单丝不成线,独木不成林。

Or a thinly veiled threat for uncooperative team members:

If the bird nest falls, will there be any unbroken egg?

Fù cháo zhī xià, ān yǒu wán luǎn?

覆巢之下,安有完卵?

7 Not afraid to threaten or shame

Criticizing others is routine work for certain officials. When cornered, he will first try to warn off his opponent by evoking some meaningless jargon, such as 注意团结 (Zhùyì tuánjié, pay attention to solidarity).

But other political phrases can be loaded with more dangerous implications: 搞特殊化 (gǎo tèshū huà, distinguish oneself) means “enjoy privilege”, suggesting decadence or corruption. If somebody breaks a rule, the criticism may imply something deeper:

You are disorganized and undisciplined; your influence is bad.

Nǐ zhè shì wú zǔzhī wú jìlǜ, yǐngxiǎng fēicháng bù hǎo.

你这是无组织无纪律,影响非常不好。

What defines a bureaucratic speech is lack of content, as well as boasting and impractical argument. Still, the longer the speech, the emptier the words. But the fact is, no matter how long the speech, the master of officialese knows how to end it.

That's all I can say. Now it's up to you!

Néng shuō de wǒ dū shuōle, nǐ kànzhè bàn ba.

能说的我都说了,你看着办吧。

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