

Common American Business Sayings: What They Say and What They *Really* Mean

In almost every culture, individuals often use informal phrases that say one thing and mean another. In American business culture, many of these phrases are used to convey messages about deadlines, costs and projects plans.

For example, when someone in the office says “we need to get our ducks in a row,” what they really mean is “we need to get our facts together and get things organized.”

As a new student to American business practices, you might find that learning these phrases are just as useful as the concepts and theories you learn in class. Take a look at 20 of the most common American business sayings and their true meanings.

Business Saying	What it Means
Ahead of the curve	To be doing something before others; to be a leader in the field
B2B	Stands for “business to business” and refers to a business that specializes in selling products or services directly to other businesses
Back to the drawing board	To start over and come up with new ideas
Ballpark figure	An estimate, typically for price or quantity of something
Between a rock and a hard place	A situation where you must choose one outcome over another, and neither are favorable
Brainstorm	A group discussion with the intent of producing new ideas or solutions to a problem
By the book	To strictly follow the rules
COB	Stands for “close of business” and is typically used when presenting a deadline—meaning close of the business day.
Cross the T’s and dot the I’s	To do something very carefully to make sure you have not made mistakes—especially when finishing a project
Fish or cut bait	To act or make a decision on something or to stop doing it
Get down to brass tacks	To talk about the specific details of something
Get off the ground	To get started on something
Go the extra mile	To put extra effort or time into your work
Hit the ground running	To get started on something right away and move fast
Rub elbows with someone	To socialize, usually with individuals that are important or have influence in a company or industry

Business Saying	What it Means
Run it up the flagpole	To present an idea and see how it is received
Sweat equity	A time or effort contribution to a project that increases its value without getting paid for it right now
SWOT analysis	An analysis of a company, product or project that helps you identify Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats
Think outside the box	To offer a new solution or think about something in a new and creative way
Wrap your head around it	To come to a good understanding of a situation