

Describing change when English is not your first language

We have recently delivered a series of Business English workshops focused on giving progress updates across international teams. In one session we focused on widening the range of verbs used to describe change and performance over time.

The aim was to give further nuance, freshness and variety when giving an update or providing a report on financial performance. We had some really interesting discussions across 6 workshops which are summarized below.

Useful verbs in describing change

Upward trends

As an alternative 'to increase' we considered 'to grow', 'to rise', 'to expand' and 'to climb'. 'To go up' was also discussed as a more relaxed phrasal verb to use in this context. We suggested 'to improve' for positive metrics.

Dramatic upward trends

We explored 'to surge', 'to soar', 'to jump' as professional verbs describing a dramatic increase. 'To rocket' and 'to explode' were suggested as more sensational and less formal equivalents. 'To skyrocket' was raised by a number of participants as a way of describing super charged growth.

A period of instability

We reviewed 'to fluctuate', 'to vary' and 'to oscillate' as professional verbs of change. 'To yo-yo' was also discussed as a more relaxed and

personal verb in this context (not recommended for formal report!).

A period of negative and then positive change

We settled on 'to recover', 'to revive', 'to rebound' as the most professional options. 'To pick up' and 'to bounce back' were discussed as semi-formal alternatives. We also explored 'to turn around' in describing a dramatic change around.

When a trend flattens

We had an interesting discussion on the difference between 'to stabilize' and 'to stagnate'. We agreed that both verbs of change were context dependent. For example, if a company's profits declined and then flattened, the verb 'to stabilise' could be applied. In contrast the verb 'to stagnate' was appropriate when the same flat line followed a period of increasing profits 'To flatten out' and 'to level off' were highlighted as context neutral. 'To calm down' was also raised as an alternative to stabilise.

Downward trends

Lots of options were discussed including 'to decrease', 'to fall', 'to reduce', 'to deteriorate' and 'to decline'. As with 'improve', it was noted that 'to deteriorate' and 'to decline' could not be used in describing a positive reduction in a budget, for example.

Dramatic downward trends

We came up with 'to plummet', 'to drop' and 'to slump' in a more professional context. 'To dive', 'to nose-dive', 'to tumble', 'to crash', 'to sink', 'to collapse' and 'to bomb' were highlighted as more dramatic alternatives that might be better suited to a newspaper

headline.

High and low points

As a group we came up with 'to peak', 'to reach a high' and 'to spike' in describing high points. 'To spike' was felt to be slightly more negative in connotation. We also reviewed 'to bottom out' and 'to reach a low' when describing the lowest point in a trend.

The final point of discussion was the little words (adverbs) we used to further qualify a change. We came up with 'dramatically', 'substantially' and 'significantly' as more professional alternatives to 'a lot'. Conversely 'slightly' and 'marginally' were considered to be professional alternatives for 'a little'.

I hope this has been helpful and have a good rest of the weekend.
