

# Heed the Red Flags in Your Head

**“How dare you question me! You don’t know anything! I’ll show you!”**



**T**he words ricocheted through my mind as I instantaneously morphed into a workplace warrior. In a split second all of my systems – my emotions, thoughts and actions – were on full battle alert. Like a powerless passenger in a runaway stagecoach, I was careening out of control and blindly headed to disaster.

BY KAY CANNON |

“Whoa,” a wise voice in my head patiently tapped me on the shoulder. “Red flag alert. Red flag alert. You need to calm down those hostile horses.”

We all have them: the red flag phrases that are tattooed in our head and shoot off like firecrackers when someone trips our trigger. Sometimes our red flags are spoken out loud for all to hear. But, more often than not, our red flags are part of a secret conversation we have with ourselves.

What are your red flags? What do you say – either out loud or to yourself – when someone or some situation annoys, challenges or frustrates you? What do you say without thinking? If you are like most folks, you have one or two phrases that automatically pop into your head. These phrases are your red flags.

Finding your red flags is the first step in gaining the awareness and self-wisdom you need to be your best at work and at home. Some common red flag phrases are:

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| “Wait a minute!”        | “You’re not right!”  |
| “I can’t believe this!” | “Oh, no, you don’t!” |
| “You’re not listening!” | “Here we go again.”  |
| “Who are you to...?!”   |                      |

A symbol of defiance in battle since the early 1600s, the red flag has become a well-known warning signal for potential danger.

Like a rattle on a rattlesnake, your red flag phrases serve as your personal early warning system. They are the signal that you believe your well-being is in danger.

Once your red flags appear, unless you are able to consciously see them, they will automatically divert your energy and focus toward protecting and defending yourself. In this state, the only options you see are fighting, fleeing or freezing. You are unable to wisely assess whether or not the situation is a real threat or a false alarm. You end up like that powerless passenger in the runaway stagecoach. You lose your full ability to be objective, creative,

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understanding and open to learning new ideas. Your vision becomes narrow and your choices limited. You overlook important pieces of information. You make wrong assumptions. You react poorly. You appear distrusting, reactive, defensive and judgmental.

On the other hand, when you learn to consciously see your red flags, you are able to calmly stop your runaway reactions and intentionally choose the best course of action. Instead of becoming a workplace warrior, you remain wise and mindful in your best self. ■

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**RESOURCE FINDER** For more Power in the Workplace insights and lessons, plan to attend Kay Cannon's in-depth workshop at the Aug. 22-23 Knowledge Network at The American Club (Kohler Waters Spa) in Kohler, Wis. For more information, visit [www.experienceispa.com](http://www.experienceispa.com).

## Find Your Red Flags

1. Think of a situation – at work or at home – that really upset you.
2. Thinking about the situation, trace it backwards to the very first moment you felt upset, the moment before you said or did anything to anyone else.
3. What was the very first thing you said to yourself in that initial moment?
4. Write it down as a potential red flag phrase.
5. Now think of another situation and repeat steps 2, 3 and 4.

Did the same red flag appear in both situations? If so, you've found one of your red flags. If not, analyze two or three more situations by following steps 2, 3 and 4. Most people discover they have the same one or two red flags appearing in both work and personal situations. Once you believe you've found your red flags, you can test your theory by examining other troubling situations to see if the red flag appears consistently.