

# Microspeak: top of mind

 [devblogs.microsoft.com/oldnewthing/20250422-00/?p=111100](https://devblogs.microsoft.com/oldnewthing/20250422-00/?p=111100)

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Although I have citations going back to 2011, the phrase *top of mind* snuck up me and has established itself in Microspeak.

It's never the full idiomatic phrase *on the top of my mind*. It just the shorthand *top of mind*.

Let's try to figure this out together. Here my earliest citation, from 2011:

Please join (senior executives) for our Employee Town Hall. This is a great time to hear what's *top of mind for them* and get a preview of new products under development.

In this case, it seems that *top of mind for X* is just shorthand for “on the top of X's mind”.

This simple explanation holds up in my second citation from 2013:

Our first town hall of 2013 is all about what's *top of mind for you*. (Senior executive) will be joined by (person) for a live Q&A discussion. This is a great opportunity for you to hear (senior executive)'s perspective on what's happening in the technology industry as well as his view on what we accomplished in the first half of this year and what's in store for the second half.

This time, it seems to be “all about what's *on the top of your mind*.” Though maybe not, because the event bills itself as giving you a chance to hear the senior executive's thoughts on various topics, rather than hearing the senior executive's thoughts on topics that are on *your* mind. So maybe it's about topics that “*should* be on the top of your mind”?

So far, the term seems to be reserved for Town Hall meetings with senior executives, but that changes in my third citation, also from 2013:

We (event organizers) kept this direction *top of mind* as we designed and developed our agenda.

The *for X* has disappeared, presumably with *for us* implied. And the term is now being used with respect to the thoughts of event organizers rather than the thoughts of a senior executive.

The next citation comes from an internal 2014 marketing newsletter.

| We took out ads highlighting a variety of X products to keep them *top of mind*.

If you continue with the assumption that *for us* is implied, then this leads to the silly conclusion that they took out ads in order to help themselves remember their own products! Presumably the implied phrase in this case is *for current and future customers*.

Although the phrase is spreading in applicability, *top of mind* continues to be dominated in my citations to situations in which a senior executive shares their thoughts with a large group of people, usually in a meeting, but also as a newsletter, email, or video.

| I (senior executive) wanted to share with you a bit about what is *top of mind* for me at both a business and a personal level.

Here's a usage as a label for a recording of a recent meeting.

| (Senior executive) Top of Mind  
As we start H2 (senior executive) shares his Top of Mind.

Notice how the phrase has now become a proper noun with capital letters. It has become a Thing. Also, the *top of mind for X* phrasing has changed to *X's Top of Mind*, further solidifying its status as a proper noun.

As the popularity of the term spreads, its usage also becomes muddier.

| At this meeting, (senior executive) will share their thoughts on what is top of mind for employees.

Is "share their thoughts on what is top of mind for employees" saying "share their answers to questions that employees are thinking about"? Or is it saying "share their guesses for what they think employees are thinking about"?

| (upper manager) and (upper manager) will share what's top of mind for the team.

This is even stranger. Using our *for X* formulation, it seems to be saying "share what's on the top of the team's mind", as if they will be performing a psychic reading to tell the team what they are thinking about. ("I see a difficult bug, it has some crashes. Does that sound like something that is worrying you?") Or maybe "share what's top of mind for the team" is trying to say "to share what issues related to the team are on the top of their minds", or possibly even "to share what they think should be on the top of the team's mind".

But really, it doesn't matter what *top of mind* means any more. It's just a phrase you throw out to sound hip and cool. Even it doesn't make sense, that's okay, because nobody reading it knows what it means either.<sup>1</sup> The phrase is just the mechanism for a

collaborative delusion that communication is taking place.

As one my colleagues astutely pointed out, most Microspeak starts at the top. When a senior executive uses a particular phrase, it becomes fashionable for others to use it, and when it becomes established in the culture, it turns into Microspeak.

For example, it is now in vogue for upper managers, not quite at senior executive level, to publish documents or send out email titled “Top of Mind for (date)”.

Here are some other examples of the phrase trickling down, used by people who are regular everyday employees, not managers or senior executives.

| There are three topics that were *top of mind* in my previous update.

| The *top of mind* engagement is to enable (feature) support for key apps that would benefit from it.

I think this next citation gives clear evidence that the term has devolved to just meaning “things of note” rather than “things that are at the forefront of my thoughts”:

#### | **Top of mind**

- TPS reports are due at the end of the month.
- The [Giving Campaign](#) has come to a close! Thanks to all who helped organize events throughout the month, as well as employees for giving time and donations.
- November is Native American Heritage Month.

I doubt these topics have been occupying the speaker’s thoughts. It’s now just a bullet list of things to mention.

<sup>1</sup> The great thing about making a promise that nobody can understand is that nobody can call you to task for failing to live up to it!