



American Expression E1529 About face

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The phrase "about face" is an idiomatic expression that is often used to describe a sudden and complete change in direction, opinion, behavior, or attitude. When someone or something makes an "about face," it means they have reversed their course or stance in a surprising and often dramatic way.

The origin of this expression can be traced to military terminology. In the military, an "about face" is a specific command given to soldiers during drill exercises. It instructs them to turn 180 degrees to face the opposite direction. This maneuver is performed swiftly and with precision, resulting in an abrupt reversal of the soldier's orientation.

In its idiomatic usage, "about face" captures the essence of this swift and complete reversal. It is often employed when describing situations where an individual or entity undergoes a significant and unexpected change in behavior, perspective, or course of action.

For instance, if a person has been advocating for a particular policy for years but suddenly starts advocating for the opposite policy, you might say they have made an "about face" on the issue. This implies a complete and sometimes surprising shift in their stance.

Similarly, in personal relationships, if someone has been distant and aloof but suddenly becomes warm and affectionate, you could describe their change in behavior as an "about face." It signifies a sudden and remarkable transformation in how they relate to others.

The phrase is also used in the context of organizations and institutions. For example, if a company has been known for its environmentally harmful practices but then adopts a strong commitment to sustainability, it can be said to have made an "about face" in its corporate values and practices.

In politics, an "about face" can refer to a politician who radically changes their position on a key issue, often for strategic reasons or to align with shifting public opinion.

"About face" can be both positive and negative in connotation. It can signify adaptability and the capacity for growth and change when the reversal is for the better. Conversely, it can imply fickleness or opportunism when the change appears to lack genuine conviction.

This idiomatic expression is valuable in communication because it succinctly captures the notion of a complete and often unexpected shift. It is a powerful way to emphasize the contrast between the past and present states of a person, organization, or situation.

In conclusion, "about face" is an idiomatic expression originating from military drill commands that signifies a sudden and complete reversal in direction, behavior, attitude, or opinion. It is used to describe situations where individuals, entities, or circumstances undergo remarkable and often surprising transformations. Whether in personal relationships, politics, or corporate culture, this phrase effectively conveys the idea of a dramatic change that catches people off guard.

Questions for Discussion

1. Can you think of a famous example from history, politics, or business where a prominent individual or organization made a significant "about face" in their stance or behavior? What were the circumstances surrounding this change, and what were the consequences?
2. How does the concept of an "about face" relate to the idea of adaptability and the ability to change one's mind or course of action when circumstances warrant it? What factors might lead someone to make such a dramatic reversal?
3. Are there instances where an "about face" can be seen as a positive or necessary response to evolving circumstances, as opposed to a sign of inconsistency or opportunism? Can you provide examples of such situations?
4. In personal relationships, how do individuals typically respond to an "about face" from someone they know, whether it's a friend, family member, or romantic partner? How does trust and communication play a role in handling such changes?
5. What strategies can individuals and organizations employ to effectively communicate and navigate through a major "about face" in their policies, values, or behavior, especially when it may be met with skepticism or resistance from others?