Business English idioms, expressions and phrases

1. A long shot

This phrase comes from sports, like basketball for example when a player is trying to shoot from a long distance. It means something unlikely to happen. With very little chance of success.  
Example: *Getting a senior position in the corporation one day is a long shot, but if you don’t try you’ll never find out if it’s possible.*

2. Back to the drawing board

This expression means to start something again from the beginning because it’s not working as you would have liked or expected.  
Example: *This project is not going as planned, let’s get back to the drawing board and fix what’s going wrong.*

3. To corner the market

To control enough quantity of a product or service that enables one to then change the market price willingly. It can also mean to be the only one making or providing a given product or service.  
Example: *Intel has pretty much cornered the market of microprocessors for servers. Their direct competition, AMD, is a distant second.*

4. Hands are tied

When you are unable to carry out any meaningful action because of regulations, rules or other people with authority.  
Example: *I wish I could help you cut through all this red tape (another business idiom meaning administrative procedures) but my hands are tied. My boss won’t let me.*

5. Up in the air

When things are highly uncertain when a decision has not been made yet.  
Example: *We were hoping to sign the contract by the end of the month, but there are still too many things up in the air we need to deal with first.*

6. To learn the ropes

To learn the basics of a profession, a specific task or activity.  
Example: *It took her a while to learn the ropes, but now she is confident and we feel that we can count on her to manage her client portfolio effectively.*

7. A learning curve

The process of learning, usually from trial and error. We often say that there can be a steep learning curve, which means that one has to learn things quickly to meet the requirements of a specific job.  
Example: *There was a steep learning curve when I started out trading stock options, but I now feel like I’m finally getting the hang of it (another idiom which means to master something).*

8. To go down swinging

An expression that comes from boxing. To swing means to throw an arcing punch. The expression refers to someone who fights to the very end, who never gives up until it’s completely over and there is no possibility of victory.  
Example: *The future of our company is uncertain due to our massive debt, but I can guarantee that we will go down swinging, whatever happens, we will not give up easily.*

9. By the book

To do things strictly by the rules.  
Example: *I don’t want to take any chances of getting caught by the financial regulators and having to pay significant fines. We have to do everything by the book.*

10. To cut corners

Almost the opposite of the book. This means to do things most quickly and cheaply to save time and money but often compromising quality and bending the rules (another expression which means not strictly following all the rules).  
Example: *The company’s decision to cut corners ended up costing them dearly when they got caught red-handed and had to pay a huge fine for committing fraud.*

11. Between a rock and a hard place

When there’s no easy way out or a good solution. Whatever you do, whichever option you choose, the outcome will not be ideal.  
Example: *Management finds itself between a rock and a hard place after the corruption scandal that has erupted. Either they file for bankruptcy and hope that law enforcement forgets about them, or they stay in business and run the risk of going to jail.*

12. From the ground up

To build or start something from nothing, from zero.  
Example: *Building a company from the ground up can bring you great pride if you are successful.*

13. The bottom line

Usually referring to the final profit margin of a business when all expenses have been paid.  
Example: *At the end of the day, what shareholders care about is the bottom line which will determine the dividends they take home every year.*

14. To get down to business

To start getting serious about something.   
Example: *We’ve wasted enough time debating on the official launch date. Let’s get down to business now, we have work to do.*

15. To get someone up to speed

To update someone on the current situation or to give them all the necessary information to allow them to complete their task or fulfil their mission.  
Example: *Why don’t you come to the office and I’ll take the time to get you up to speed before we go to the meeting.*

16. It’s not rocket science

Something not very complicated.  
Example: *I don’t understand why there are so many mistakes in this report. It’s not rocket science!*

17. To think outside the box

To think unconventionally, creatively and explore new non-conformist ideas.  
Example: *If you want to succeed in this highly competitive economic environment, you have to think outside of the box to gain an edge on your rivals.*

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