

# Excuses, Excuses: Leadership That Avoids The Blame Game

**Do. Or do not. There is no try.**

So said Yoda, the Jedi Master from the *Star Wars* space opera.

It's good advice for anyone of any age. But with confidence in politicians at record lows and daily headlines about corporate stumbles, excuses are in rich supply.

There's still an immutable law: Words are words. Explanations are explanations. But only performance is reality.

Dr. Margaret Bradley is a practical psychologist who coaches executives on performance issues. Her recent book is *Wouldacouldashoulda: Rapid Results. No Excuses*. She provides some helpful insights into how to avoid the blame game.

**Rodger Dean Duncan:** Why is it worthwhile for a leader to manage excuses?

**Margaret Bradley:** In most organizations, 70% of operating expenses are in human capital. Excuses are major obstacles to success. They decrease morale, sap energy, lead to misunderstandings, confuse communication, and damage credibility. Even an incremental increase in a team's productivity can have a huge impact on the bottom line.

A study by Challenger Gray & Christmas, focused on the average tenure of executives, noted that stakeholder scrutiny of leader performance is increasing. This is occurring

in all industries. There's also an increased demand for accountability.

The pressure has intensified to get great results. Delays are not tolerated. Neither are excuses. And there's no time for leaders to allow themselves to be distracted by excuses of their associates. Eliminating excuses gives your team an edge by enabling it to work faster while maintaining a high level of quality.

**Duncan:** What's the biggest myth about excuses?

**Bradley:** Excuses are inherently bad. Right? Not necessarily. *Unexamined* excuses are bad. When you take time to study excuses and find their causes, you gain valuable information that you can use to enhance you team's performance and your effectiveness as a leader.

For example, if you collect and study the excuses that customers give for not making a purchase, you learn what is important to them and where you should focus your team's efforts in the future.

Robert Townsend, author of *Up the Organization*, said: "One of the most important tasks of a manager is to eliminate people's excuses for failure."

Excuses indicate the biggest stumbling blocks and indicate where a leader should allocate resources. When's the last time you performed an excuse audit? Are there patterns

to the excuses you hear? Do they point out a need for more reasonable deadlines? Do you need to reassign responsibilities? What do excuses say about your leadership style or how you are perceived as a role model?

**Duncan:** What are some strategies that leaders can use to get rid of excuses?

**Bradley:** There are many sure-fire strategies for zapping excuses before they become a problem. One that's particularly important when you are choosing members for your team is to be careful who your associates are. You become just like them. Do they make excuses? If they do, chances are good that you will too.

Most leaders know how to screen job applicants for skills and experience. Some even consider personality traits when they are hiring. But how many include interview questions that indicate how a prospective member handles excuses? If candidates have had success dealing with ambiguity, being resourceful, or demonstrating resilience, it's an indication that they are not going to slow the team down with excuses.

Other strategies include learning to unlearn, leveraging strengths, and paying attention to the power of language. The first step is to assess your attitude toward excuses.

Next, customize excuse-zapping techniques to match your leadership style and the job requirements.

**Duncan:** When does excuse management matter the most?

**Bradley:** Being aware of excuses and how they influence productivity always pays dividends. But abolishing excuses right after you become the leader of a new or existing work group is critical. You have an opportunity to establish norms and set an example. You're creating an environment that promotes excellence and defining your expectations.

Think of the best experience you've ever had being on a team. What made it great? You'll probably list clear communication, a sense of purpose, colleagues you could trust, and a chance to build upon strengths. The focus was on solving problems quickly. Excuses were non-existent. There's a saying, "Give up, give in, or give it all you've got."

Leaders who don't eliminate excuses from their first day on the job are giving up on achieving excellence and giving in to spending unnecessary time, money, and other resources. Those who deliberately ban excuses increase the probability of living without regrets. They win respect, generate new opportunities, and gain access to scarce resources.

Who wouldn't choose to work on a team where excuses don't exist? An excuse-free culture attracts the best. And it leads to maximizing talents and thriving in challenging business conditions.



**Rodger Dean Duncan** is the bestselling author of CHANGE-friendly LEADERSHIP: How to Transform Good Intentions into Great Performance. Follow him on Twitter @DoctorDuncan



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