



Excuses

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Do you have topic ideas? Comments or questions?

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I have no time for excuses. Perhaps that ends this discussion. But to be fair, there are certain times and occasions when we cannot meet our commitments. It happens to us all. So what do we do? If you, as a businessperson (or any type of person), believe in the underlying principles of accountability and respect of other people, excuses as a reaction to missed commitments will be virtually eliminated from your behavioural agenda. Let's see how.

A Recent Story

This past weekend I hosted a social occasion, a small pre-concert party for some friends, having arranged for this event more than two months before. Two couples did not show, one sending me an excuse by email and the other not even a peep. How do I feel about those people? How would you feel? Since the event included not only a full meal and drink, and in the rush to get the group to the concert on time, I had to limit the number of people I could invite, to 4 couples. When 2 of those couples did not show, the assembly was embarrassingly small and the amount of food embarrassingly large. Would I have gone to that much work had I known it was for just 2 couples? Well a 10-pound turkey probably would not have been on the menu. The email excuse came two hours before the event. Since I was busily running around cleaning and cooking, what would be the chance of my looking at my email? And after people arrived, would I be likely to interrupt the conversations for an email check?

The questions are: Was this predictable behaviour for these people? Could there have been an

alternative for them. The answer to both questions is 'yes' as described in the last two sections.

Why an Excuse is not Enough

If you received an urgent message that your son had just been taken to a hospital, the odds are that you would drop whatever you are doing to be at his side at the moment. There are very few occasions that would prevent you from being urgently supportive to a family member in need. (Those occasions do exist, mind you, and that is true of any situation: e.g. you are in another city; you are delivering an address to the Kiwanis club that very moment, etc. We will get to that later.) The point is, if you really need to be there, you will find a way to get there. From that falls the axiom, if you don't care so much for the event, you may not be there. And that, dear friends is what an excuse is: a statement of why the event was not sufficiently important for you, why that friend or associate was not sufficiently important to you or, in more direct CCCC lingo, why you do not sufficiently respect that person. If this judgement seems unduly harsh, read through those sentences again. They can only



lead to one conclusion: you did not respect the person sufficiently to meet the commitment you had already made to the individual.

Conversely, if you respect a person you will meet the commitment made to them, come hell or high water. And if an act of nature or major events prevented that from happening, instead of an excuse, you will offer an acknowledgement of your responsibility for the missed commitment. (Again, more about that later.)

Realize that the excuses you offer are merely words; your actions have spoken louder than the words – and the personal hurt felt, despite the excuse, reflect the inner brain's acknowledgement of the lack of respect.

Realize, also, that many people believe that an excuse absolves them of blame or responsibility. We are responsible for ourselves; no one else is. And the excuse doesn't work as an absolver anyway; the persons on the other end always feel slighted – because they have been slighted!

Translating the Situation to Business Meetings

When we hold business meetings strictly following the agenda of the *Safe Environment*¹, where respect for individuals is paramount, we take two actions related to this discussion paper. First, the meeting starts on time (and it ends on time) so that we are respecting the busy agendas of all participants. To drive home that message many of our clients agree that the door of the meeting room will close at the meeting start and late members will either not be allowed to enter, or will draw attention to themselves when they do enter late. The second related meeting action is to assign a Referee role at the meeting who notes

any violations of respectful behaviour. "The traffic on the Queensway was terrible this morning", says our late comer. The Referee adds: "All excuses accepted in advance, John; please pay your acknowledgement of one Loonie per minute late, which in this case would be six dollars to the company coffee fund." I can assure you that the public acknowledgement creates a far deeper imprint than the \$6.

What Should Happen

What you should do, when late, is to follow a two-part action: simply apologize and acknowledge your own error with a fact. For example, you might say: "My apologies, I did not allow myself enough time this morning." If unable to attend altogether, you might offer an explanation – but not an excuse. And again it would be in two parts, apology and acknowledgement of your own responsibility. "Hello Eric, I'm sorry I can't attend your party; I've chosen to nurse my cold." Better still, announce your impending lateness in advance with a phone call.

Conclusion

When a person becomes responsible this way, that individual will meet commitments most of the time. No longer absolving oneself with excuses, the person automatically becomes more diligent about meeting commitments and either meets them more consistently or is less willing to commit oneself so readily. Missed commitments for such a person become an exception rather than a predictable habit.

Good luck

Bill Caswell

¹ Safe Environment is a defined process based on a set of procedures to engender respect of all individuals in that Environment.