THE FIVE GREATEST EXCUSES

By Stephanie Maddocks

I thought that by kindergarten, I had cultivated all the excuses I needed to avoid getting in trouble. Yes, I did say to my mom on more than one occasion, with innocent Bambi eyes and a halo floating above my head, "It wasn't me. *He* did it," pointing at my little brother. Sometimes, this was actually true. And, sometimes, it spared me some creative punishment … at least until my dad came home from work and the real punishment was meted out, as he was immune to the Bambi eyes.

However, after recently sitting in a meeting with a group of adults discussing a software implementation plan, I felt like I was being drawn back to my childhood with the multitude of excuses being thrown around to explain why tasks were not being completed. The only difference between age 5 and age 40 was that we were all taller and didn't get a naptime in the afternoon. These excuses all centered around inaction and the many reasons why something wasn't getting done, including a great deal of pointing blame at someone else. During this very expensive hour of time, I heard these five excuses from no fewer than 30 adult members of this team:

1. This is how we've always done it.
2. They don't need to know.
3. Can't they figure it out on their own?
4. They won't understand it anyway.
5. I can do it all.

I am betting that if these folks could have blamed it on my little brother, they would have gladly used that excuse, too. I know that my parents didn't believe many of my protestations of innocence, and I certainly didn't believe the excuses these business professionals were using to justify their lack of progress and ineffective communication and teamwork. It started me thinking about the birth of these excuses and what my parents would say if I used them today.

1) This is how we've always done it.

The ultimate excuse for inaction is the assumption that the way we're doing it now is perfect. This excuse is usually first expressed by those team members who are resistant to change. They are comfortable in their environment and know that any disruption is going to create more work for someone—hopefully not for them.

During this meeting, this excuse was the answer to why a policy and procedure hadn't been revised in order to support a new system implementation. The new system didn't operate the same way as the previous system, and the group couldn't seem to grasp that operations had to change.

To be fair, in some cases, this statement can be a reasonable cause for maintaining the status quo. However, whenever I hear it, it is an alarm bell that tells me that the team is so used to how things have been done in the past that they are unwilling or unable to see a way to modify business to improve the operation.

The solution for this one is to help the team think outside the box, identifying the current assumptions and then challenging them. It takes time to understand—and accept—that change is inevitable and is going to happen whether they resist it or embrace it. As Dad would say, "Get over it, it's going to change whether you like it or not."

2) They don't need to know.

This excuse is the beginning of a power struggle between team leadership and team members. As soon as information becomes a power commodity that can be used to barter between groups, the team deteriorates and becomes an "us against them" battle. The communication issues and lack of respect that grow out of secrecy only serve to undermine teamwork and drive the project toward failure.
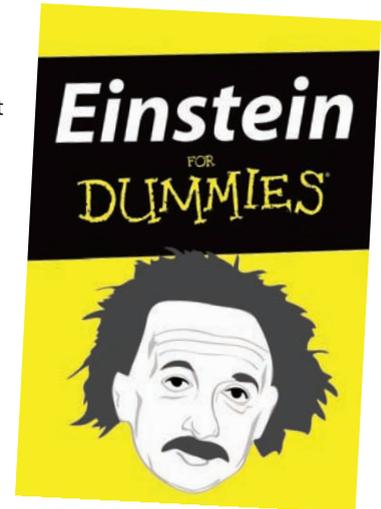
This excuse was leveled when the discussion turned to how the new policy and procedure was going to be introduced to the casino floor staff. It is hard to believe that the casino floor staff wouldn't need to know this bit of information in order to perform their jobs in a compliant and efficient manner.

The solution for this one is that all team members, no matter their significance, position or title, need to be involved in sharing information and understanding the key decisions related to the success of a project. It sounds simple and it is simple. While knowledge may be power, communication is the key to success. My grandma would happily weigh in on this excuse with another lecture along the lines of "you have to share because that is what grownups do."

3) Can't they figure it out on their own?

I call this one the *Einstein for Dummies* theory. This statement is based on the belief that if everyone is left to their own devices, they will be able to master any tasks to the genius level. I have not found anyone yet in my entire working career that, when left with no instruction, can read minds and figure out how the boss wants something done. If that were true, I would patent it and sell it, a lot of marriages would be saved, and I would be living in a tropical paradise, collecting royalty checks.

This excuse was also leveled during the discussion about training the staff on policy and procedure. The issue was whether or not they would just learn the new procedure while they were processing transactions using the new system. Last I knew, osmosis was not an effective method of knowledge transfer. The final result was that the policy and procedure document would be provided to the floor staff during software training classes.

The solution for this one is to have the team acknowledge that learning takes time, that different people learn in different manners and at different speeds, and that providing as many opportunities to learn as possible will continue to reinforce the message. This lesson was emphasized during my Driver's Ed classes in high school, when the instructor, with the patience of a saint, would continually repeat, "The brake is the pedal on the left."

4) They won't understand it anyway.

This is a purely ego-based excuse in that "they" are always not as smart as "we" are. Somehow an assumption had formed that, just by being part of the transition team, this group of executives was smarter and more skilled than the operational people working the casino floor who actually performed the tasks being discussed.

This excuse was provided by the team leader, who apparently figured that the floor staff members weren't smart enough to read and comprehend the policy and procedure that they were being provided. Perhaps role-playing or instruction on how to perform their functions in line with the policy and procedure would help the group understand the documentation provided to them. Or another option would be to write the policy and procedure so that it would be understood by everyone it applies to.

The solution for this one is, frankly, to have the team recognize that each and every team member has a valuable contribution and that respect is a core value to any interaction. There are great lesson plans on the Internet designed for elementary school teachers to help teach respect. As my kindergarten teacher explained each day

during recess, the Golden Rule in its simplest form is to treat others the way you would like to be treated.

5) I can do it all.

These are not only the selfish team members who are not willing to share responsibility or rewards, but these are also the most immature leaders, because they cannot see the value in delegating. If individual contribution was the only necessary part of a project, we would not have teams.

This excuse was the answer to the question, "Do you need help to develop materials, distribute them, and train on the new policy and procedure?" The team leader, who was already overwhelmed by the scope of the project, was willing to work himself to exhaustion just to prove his worth to the organization.

The solution for this one is to remind the team that, by its very nature, a team is more than one person; it is a group of people linked through common purpose. Hillary Clinton, I believe, brought this one home with her book *It Takes a Village: And Other Lessons Children Teach Us*. It does take a village to ensure a successful project completion for any team-based project.

After all the excuses and the bickering, this project was completed, and the team was mostly intact throughout the process. The members were a little worse for wear and certainly had battle scars to prove their commitment to their ideals.

So, what did I learn through this process? When faced with excuses, it is always effective to change the approach to the issue and look for alternative solutions. Excuses abound, and only through perseverance to fight against the status quo and effective two-way communication can consensus be achieved and goals actually be met. Oh, and there are just some people who should have been held back for another year in kindergarten.

■ ■ ■ ■ ■

◣ STEPHANIE **MADDOCKS**

Stephanie Maddocks is President of Power Strategies, a Las Vegas-based technology consulting company that provides technology selection, planning and implementation, and business operations services. She can be reached at (702) 460-6600 or stephmaddocks@gmail.com.