



End Excuses, Add Action

Eliminate the three-letter “b” word from your vocabulary.

By Tracey C. Jones

One day, during lunch break, a worker opened his lunchbox, pulled out two sandwiches, hoisted them aloft, and cried to the heavens in anguish, “Not peanut-butter sandwiches again!”

The next day, he opened his lunchbox, peered inside, and wailed in agony, “Not peanut-butter sandwiches again!”

Day after day, the scene played out: open lunch box, extract contents, “Oh, no! Peanut-butter sandwiches again!”

Finally, after 13 days of unchanging lunchtime drama, his coworker said, “Say, if you don’t like peanut-butter sandwiches, why don’t you ask your wife to make you something else?”

“You leave my wife out of this,” he replied. *“I make my own lunch!”*

We all make our own sandwiches, and too many of us make sandwiches that we don’t like to eat. Here are a few ways to take control of what’s in your lunchbox.

1. Prune the word *but* from your vocabulary. It’s just as important to weed your mind as your physical surroundings, and an effective way to do so is to eliminate the word *but*. Excuses are mental weeds that strangle any chance of new growth regardless of how many seeds you plant. They’re virulent vines that strangle everything in their vicinity. Excusatory words can be just as venomous as accusatory

ones. Steer clear of both. They’re two strains of the same weed.

It’s common in the workplace to give a compliment and then follow it with “but. . .” Have you ever said something like, “You did a good job on the proposal, but it’s too long”? The words after the “but” strip the earlier words of their impact and destroy motivation.

Replacing “but” with “and” – “The proposal is great, and it just needs to be shortened a bit” – makes all the difference.

You’ve probably done the same thing to yourself. You might think, “I gave a good speech this morning, but it wasn’t funny enough.” If you change the “but” to an “and” – “and next time I’ll add some good jokes” – you’ll add a positive spin, inspire yourself to improve, and infuse your environment with more vitality and purpose.

When you expunge “but” from your vocabulary, an amazing thing happens. Where you used to see unfairness and lost chances, you’ll find fortune and opportunity. What you say and what you think affect your circumstances in a very real way. Changing what comes out of your mouth – and what you say to yourself in your head – can give you a whole new outlook. You can create a life of possibility and potential by avoiding a simple three-letter word.

2. Don’t be an excuse enabler. Excuses come in two categories. The first category derives from things you don’t do despite the negative impact of inaction. For example, you know you ought to form a more constructive relationship with your board chair, yet you keep putting off any effort to do so, telling yourself you don’t have the time right now and it’s not that important anyway. Such self-justifications are insidious and lead to even more pervasive inaction.

“You can create possibility by avoiding a simple three-letter word.”

“For things to change, first you must change.”

The second category derives from things you won't stop doing. For instance, you spend a great deal of time with negative people who reinforce your worst habits. You know you would be much more productive if you spent time with more positive people, yet inertia keeps you making excuses for continuing down the wrong path.

There's nothing productive to be gained by making excuses or by repeating them. Repetition gives them credibility and allows them to continue to drain you and others. Making excuses exiles you to a perpetual rut. Choosing to take responsibility for your happiness and your attitude frees you to move on to bigger and better things.

3. Learn to recognize cognitive dissonance. When you know you ought to start a healthy habit or end a harmful one and yet don't do so, you put yourself into a state of cognitive dissonance, in which your beliefs and behaviors conflict. According to cognitive dissonance theory, you have an inner drive to bring your thoughts and acts into harmony. Recognizing that you're in this state of dissonance can help motivate you to change. Realize that you'll eliminate much pain if you bring your attitudes and actions into compatibility. Reducing dissonance will bring you a burst of added energy that you can use in meeting your goals.

When you associate with thankless, negative, or unethical people you become poisoned by them. It's not their fault; it's your own. When you lack the discipline or self-esteem to break a negative habit, you poison yourself. For things to change, first you must change. Then you have the power to help others in your organization change as well. It starts with you, and the results are enormous. **S**

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