



LANGUAGE OF
LEADERSHIP



THE

EXCUSES

**AND HOW TO
DEAL WITH
THEM**

Erik Berglund | 2023

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THE BRASS TACKS

There are four types of excuses, and this book is going to teach you what they are and how to handle them by:

- Teaching you what to listen for
- Showing you what to avoid
- Arming you so you can address and re-direct the conversation

We can't stop everyone from making an excuse, but we can eliminate the stress they bring to your life. It is possible to no longer dread or avoid necessary conversations or find yourself derailed and way off-topic when you hear one. You may even get a kick out of the tactics we'll lay out in this book—I know students in my academy do!

But you have to know what to listen for, what to avoid, how to address them, and how to redirect those efforts in a productive way if you're going to transform excuses into excellence.

In order to get that 'know how', you're going to need to read the rest of this ebook. In order to get good at it, you're going to need to explore my Sneak Peak Course or The Academy (I'll tell you more about both later).

A FEW NOTES

How to get as much out of this as possible

It's important to note that the solutions offered in this book are not 'magic bullets'. They won't slay the dragon of Excuses just by saying the words out-loud in the right order. The way you say the words – your cadence, tonality, use of silence or enunciation will matter as much as, if not more, than the words themselves.

These are skills you can practice, but even with perfect delivery, the excuses you're facing are indicative of real challenges your people are facing. You're going to have to work through those with them in order to truly achieve excellence. The purpose of this book is to help you get past the excuse so you can lead your people to the next level of success.

You'll notice there are a few links throughout the ebook. Check them out, those resources will really help you continue your journey as a leader. I'd like it if this ebook led you to check out either my free sneak peek course or to have you check out one of my webinars for The Academy.

Last – This is designed to help you take action. Knowledge is cool, but skill and action are cooler. *Take action – apply this stuff and stop dealing with excuses.*

[Check Out The Academy](#)

[Check Out The Course](#)

EXCUSES ARE LIKE...

We all have them

Everyone has dealt with a situation where the person across from them begins to make excuses...

"Oh, I didn't realize..."

"Yeah, it took a lot longer than we thought..."

"I'll do it on this upcoming sprint..."

"My dog ate my laptop..."

The last may be a stretch, but the rest probably sound familiar.

It's pretty easy to tell ourselves "I would never do that," or start to think "Why won't they just..." We begin to demonize the other person and elevate ourselves.

It's important to remember that everyone in a leadership role has made excuses, probably more than once, and probably recently.

We all do it. In fact, a 2020 study conducted by Onepoll found that Americans make over 2,190 excuses a year. **Excuses are efforts to control the narrative of a conversation people don't want to have;** and it makes sense, as people we're naturally inclined to avoid things that are uncomfortable or unpleasant.

However, if you're in a leadership position you understand that being on the receiving end of an excuse is equally as uncomfortable—*Because it flusters us - "what the heck am I supposed to say now that this person has made this excuse?"*

It's helpful to think of excuses like a trap. The excuse is the bait; once you take it, the conversation has been derailed. Instead of talking about the thing you came to address, you'll find yourself debating the excuse and the line of thinking the excuse opens:

"Well, I would never do that..."

"I thought knowing x was something that we had stated clearly?"

"Do they even have a dog?"

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We can't stop everyone from making an excuse, but we can eliminate the stress they bring to your life. It is possible to no longer dread or avoid necessary conversations or find yourself derailed and way off-topic when you hear one. You may even get a kick out of the tactics we'll lay out in this book—I know students in my academy do!

But you have to know what to listen for, what to avoid, how to address them, and how to redirect those efforts in a productive way if you're going to transform excuses into excellence.

Identify

Avoid

Address

Redirect



SOME IMPORTANT CONTEXT

Three lenses to allow us to think clearly

Before we get into the types of excuses and how to handle them, there are a few things that we need to understand about excuses and how they affect us and the other person. Empathy is important when you're leading people—being able to put yourself in someone else's shoes will allow you to better connect with your team and help empower them to stop using excuses as well.

It's easy to get frustrated with people when they make an excuse: demonize them, think of them as “lesser” than ourselves, or even compare them to other individuals that we're working with who may very well be rockstars at their position.

Remember, we all make excuses, including those “rockstars” on your team. So, let's dive into three things you need to understand about excuses before you tackle them.

1

Excuses are emotionally charged and rarely well thought out

The more prepared person will 'win'



Remember, excuses are reactionary in nature. It's quite uncommon for someone to have a thoroughly rehearsed excuse. They just haven't planned that far ahead. We get into the conversation and find ourselves hearing quick responses like:

- "I had to prioritize other things..."
- "The software I needed to do this wasn't working..."
- "I am still waiting on individual x to finish up something before I can begin..."

It's unlikely the person has thought much beyond that quick response. It's unlikely to bear much scrutiny and will likely unravel if challenged correctly.

This conversation is a game and the more prepared party is likely to 'win.' If we stop and acknowledge that the other side isn't well prepared, hence why they are using the excuse, it will be much easier to approach the conversation.

That's what you're trying to have. A *conversation*. Most of the time we bump into excuses because someone didn't do what they said they'd do, or they did it late, or they did it poorly. Those are really the only ways for someone to be 'unaccountable'.

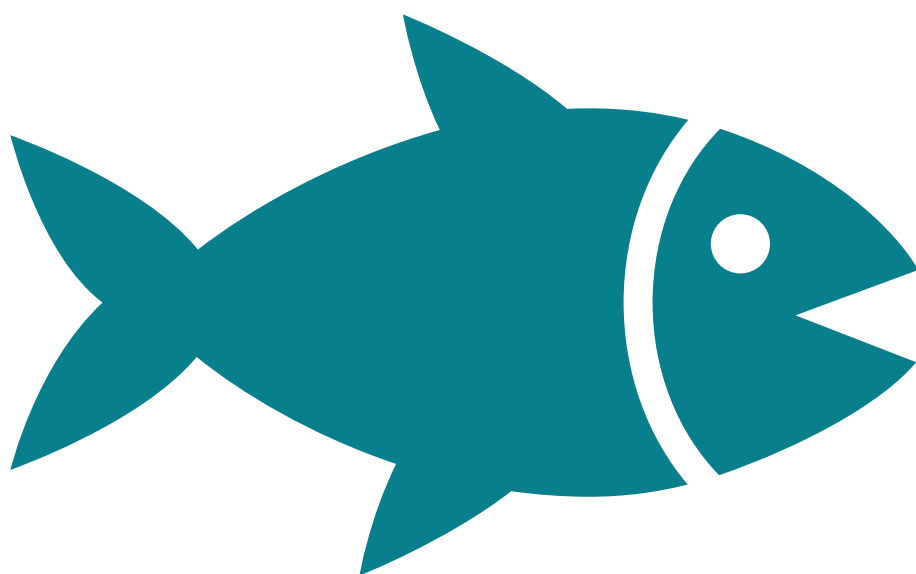
This lack of accountability, and lack of preparation, can lead to an **emotionally loaded conversation**.

You may be carrying some frustration or baggage into the conversation: with this person, this issue, how frequently you've dealt with the issue or just general stress you're carrying.

The other person is in the same boat. They (most likely) realize they didn't do the thing, did it late, or did it poorly. It's important to recognize that they may have some insecurities or doubts about the task, their job, their career, their relationship with you, or their own general life baggage—all of which are things they will carry into the conversation.

Point being, this conversation is loaded from the beginning. Either party is subject to some emotional amplification of the dialogue, probably unintentionally. This tripwire can work in our favor as well. The person who can see the tripwire ahead of time is more likely to avoid it. Let that person be you.

If you can anticipate an excuse, and accept the emotionally loaded context of the conversation, you'll be a lot more likely to handle it well.



2

**Excuses are
meant as bait.**

Don't take it!

How many excuses have you heard? Don't the variations seem endless? It can feel like a daunting task to anticipate the excuses, because who the heck knows what that person will make up? Sometimes, it feels useless to even try. This will help:

There are only four types of excuses. They are all meant to Hijack The Narrative.

Not 100 or 1000, just four. This means it's easy to listen for which type of excuse you're dealing with, and to be prepared with simple go-to statements for addressing the excuse and redirecting the conversation toward a productive outcome.

For each excuse, there's an anticipated response that's designed to hook you into changing the conversation track.

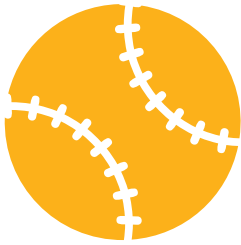
If you play along, the other person succeeds in derailing the narrative. Before you know it, you're debating the excuse instead of talking about how to resolve the thing in question.

Remember, excuses are bait to derail conversations. Once you can see the bait, you can avoid it, and deploy your own counter statement.

3

An unexpected benefit

You can condition your people.



Getting good at this process – Identifying, avoiding, addressing, redirecting – has an unexpected benefit. The most obvious is that it handles the excuse in the moment, allowing you and the other person to continue moving forward instead of stalling in excuse-land. The Less obvious benefit is:

Handling excuses effectively conditions your people to use fewer excuses in the future.

Conditioning is a common topic in my academy. It's how we condition our teams that creates an environment where we, and the other people, can enjoy our jobs a lot more and be a heck of a lot more effective.

An easy, timeless example of this comes from Major League Baseball. The Curveball is a classic pitch for most teams. The purpose is to hijack the eye and muscle memory of the batter, so they swing at where they think the ball **should be**, only to have it break, or curve, at the right moment. This ends up with a world class whiff—or in other terms, a strike.

But what happens when batters are really good at hitting Curveballs?

Two players stand out in Major League Baseball. Tony Gwynn, drafted in 1982 by the San Diego Padres, and Joey Votto, drafted in 2007 by the Cincinnati Reds. Both managed to maintain batting averages over .300 for their careers (truly remarkable in the sport), winning multiple awards for their ability to consistently make contact, regardless of what pitches are thrown their way.

These two are so good at hitting curveballs that pitchers refused to throw curveballs at all when those players were up to bat. So what happened? The pitchers were forced to try other pitches, knowing that the curve would not strike out those players. *Votto and Gwynn have conditioned opposing pitchers that curveballs aren't going to work, and so the pitchers don't even try.*

You can condition your people this way as well. ***Once they realize that you aren't going to swing at the curve, they'll be forced to try something different*** – perhaps actually getting the thing done correctly and on time!



HOW TO NAVIGATE ANY EXCUSE

All four of them

Yes, there are only four. Once you know what they are, and what to listen for to identify them, you can navigate the excuse effectively.

Here's the process for navigating any excuse:

1. Identify which type you're dealing with
2. Avoid the bait that's designed to 'hijack' the narrative
3. Address the excuse with a simple one line response
4. Redirect to a more productive conversation

For Each of the below excuses, I'll lay out what to listen for, how to avoid the bait, how to address it, and how to redirect. I'll give more examples of redirection after we explore the four types of excuses.

It's important to note that you're going to need to customize this language to best fit your situation. The way you'll use these words will vary wildly between your conversation with a 55 year old iron worker, a 32 year old programmer, and a 22 year old intern. Age, experience, relationship, industry, and many other factors are going to impact how you speak to the individual.

However, regardless of any of those factors, there are still only four types of excuses and this process holds true.

THE FOUR TYPES OF EXCUSES

- It's Not My Fault
- I'm On It Now Boss
- I Didn't Know
- That's Not Normal / This is Special

EXCUSE #1

“IT’S NOT MY FAULT”

In my experience, some variation of this is *the most common type of excuse*.

It’s not always said this directly. Sometimes it can look like this:

- “I was waiting for this thing and it never came”
- “This thing was supposed to happen first”
- “Bob never sent me the thing...”
- “This task is much harder than I thought... you have no idea...”
- “I’m really burned out and this was way more than I thought...”

The excuse makes the point that “it’s not my fault.”

The baited response is “Yes it is” or “It should be” or “yea huh” in some variation or another.

If you take the bait, you’re debating. You came to them because you needed something, needed it sooner, or needed it done differently. Because of the excuse, you’re no longer talking about the issue at hand. Instead, you’re wasting time, amplifying emotions, and debating with the other person. By taking the bait, the other person never has to talk about your thing, and you’re no closer to a resolution.

If that person had been truly responsible, they would have pushed through that obstacle, chased down that document from the client, asked questions, followed up with Bob, etc. Despite the obstacles, they would have owned it and pushed through. Perhaps they wouldn’t have changed the outcome, but their efforts would have negated the need to use an excuse.

To address this, we remind them of this reality. The best way to address this is:

“A lot of things happen that aren’t our fault, but still our responsibility” – And then redirect!

Once you offer that perspective, you’re now redirecting, and taking control of the conversation.

SUMMARY:

IDENTIFY:	“It’s not my fault...”
AVOID:	Debating whether it is or not
ADDRESS:	Use a variation of “there are often things that aren’t our fault but are still our responsibility...”
REDIRECT:	“How are you going to....”

EXCUSE #2

“I DIDN’T KNOW”

This excuse sounds like:

- “I didn’t know...”
- “I wasn’t aware...”
- “I didn’t realize...”
- “Why didn’t you tell me!?”

But they are all intended to get you to debate whether or not they should have known.

It might be the easiest to use because unless the expectations were explicit, *it’s pretty tough to prove what someone knew, or should have known.* If you’ve ever heard this before, you know it’s frustrating, because most of the time you can’t debate it very well.

It can also be presented in an emotionally loaded way. It can sound like ‘If you knew this was a problem, why didn’t you bring to my attention earlier?’

This is designed to turn it around and make it your fault. And in the moment, especially if you genuinely should have approached them earlier, it can be difficult to decouple that burden from the conversation you’re trying to have. That’s what makes it such effective bait – it might be true.

To navigate this additional nuance, we can simply say “perhaps I should have approached you earlier, but we’re here now”. Keep the conversation moving forward, instead of getting trapped into defending yourself. Don’t offer your own excuse back – demonstrate to them how to take responsibility, and then move on.

This one can also be very frustrating! It’s natural to think *“What do you mean you didn’t know!!? How could you not we’ve talked about it XYZ # of times!!”*

Remember that our goal here is to move forward, and that debating it will only hijack the conversation. Unless that person explicitly told you that they knew the thing, you do not want to end up in this debate. **It’s nearly impossible to prove what someone ‘should’ have known and move a conversation forward productively.**

The best way to address this is:

“Now that you do know, let’s talk about it” – And Then redirect!

SUMMARY:

IDENTIFY:	“I Didn’t Know”
AVOID:	Debating whether they should have known or not
ADDRESS:	“Now that you do know....”
REDIRECT:	“How are you going to....”

EXCUSE #3

“I’M ON IT NOW”

This excuse can stand alone, but it can also be served as the second part of any of the other excuses we listed. It tends to be a way for the person to end the conversation quickly, to avoid any awkwardness.

For example, you could approach someone with a conversation and they could easily say

- “Oh yea, I’ll totally do that now!”
- “Hey thanks for bringing that to my attention, I didn’t know, but I’ll do it differently from now on!”
- “Got it, will do!”

And sometimes that proves true and the other person will do things differently.

However, if you were bringing this to someone’s attention for the nth time, or if it’s really important, it’s critical that they don’t convince you that they magically know how to do it. They probably didn’t do it

because they don’t know how to do some part of it or they’ve under prioritized it.

Without more detail, they probably aren’t going to succeed now where they’ve failed before.

By saying “I’m on it now!” they are really trying to avoid a longer conversation with you. *They’re hoping you’ll say “Great, thanks!” and never have to talk about it again.*

This one can be sneaky, but it usually doesn’t feel adversarial. People are smart and know that if they agree with you verbally, but their tone and body language say otherwise, you won’t believe them. So they might be overly enthusiastic or positive in their response, *almost overtly so. We have to be wary of this.*

When people in my course hear this, they want to make sure that they arm that enthusiasm with the possibility of success by having the other person talk through their plan, so it’s more likely to succeed. No one likes having conversations multiple times, and this is our chance to prevent that from happening.

The way to address the “I’m on it now” is to quickly capture that momentum and propel it into an expectation-setting conversation.

The best way to address this is:

“I’m so glad you agree this is important, let’s talk about how...” – And then redirect!

SUMMARY:

IDENTIFY:	“I’m on it now” (or some enthusiastic and quick agreement)
AVOID:	Sending them out to ‘fix it’ without knowing exactly what they’ll change
ADDRESS:	“I’m glad you agree this is important, let’s talk about how...”
REDIRECT:	“How are you going to....”

EXCUSE #4

“THAT’S NOT NORMAL”

This excuse can take many forms as well and potentially create confusion.

It can sound like a person reassuring you that what you saw or heard isn't reflective of their normal behavior **or** that the situation was special. It was a one-off. No biggie. Bad day. Etc. Sometimes it can sound like this:

- “Yeah, I was not on my game this week...”
- “Weird, no idea how I didn't catch that...”
- “Oh, I couldn't get to it because x was down and didn't get back up until...”

For the trained ear, it's easy to initially hear “That's not Normal” and translate it to what they really mean, which is “That's not my fault”—and pivot accordingly. You'll notice my third example above is actually a ‘not my fault’ excuse – it can be easy to blur these two types together. If their excuse begins to sound like ‘the

situation was special’ – it's actually a ‘not my fault’.

But when it's not a sneaky way of saying ‘That's not my fault’, the point of “That's not normal” is to challenge your perception of something that has happened: performance, habit, professionalism, SOP's, etc.

It's an act of direct resistance to the conversation, meant to diminish whatever you said and invalidate it.

It's important to realize that the other person may actually believe this. We are excellent at deluding ourselves, and we often lack perfect mirrors. We all have blind spots. You could be sharing something with them that's in a blind spot, so this dismissive tone or approach may be genuine, despite being designed to derail progress.

Because this is a direct challenge, **the tone can be more combative. Your tone in response needs to be measured.** If you take the bait, it's easy for this conversation to turn to confrontation where you find both you, and the other party, agitated and a long way off from the original topic.

You need to be able to confront this directly, but your tonality and body language are either going to make it significantly easier, or harder. (In The Academy, intentionally controlling these are a big part of what we do.)

The best way to address this is:

“It's more common than you may realize and it's important we work through it. How will you...” – And then redirect.

SUMMARY:

IDENTIFY:	“That's not Normal...” or is it actually “Not my fault”
AVOID:	Accepting the dismissal or debating it
ADDRESS:	“It's more common than you may realize and it's important we work through it. How are...”
REDIRECT:	“How are you going to...”



THE REDIRECT

How to turn towards excellence

The professionals in my course learn that you can redirect into an **Accountability Conversation** (when did you realize...), an **Expectations Conversation** (What's your opinion on....), or a **Conflict Conversation** (What's the Impact of...).

These are frameworks designed to hold someone accountable, set or reset expectations, and drive change.

When redirecting, it's important to maintain momentum. If you leave open air, the other person may continue to try to hijack the conversation – they'll redirect back to their excuse. So you need to move quickly and fluidly from Addressing the excuse into your Redirect.

An open-ended conversation will force the other person to apply their brain to doing something different (The whole reason you started the conversation). The purpose of the redirect is to get this open-ended conversation started, moving you quickly away from the excuse.

A general redirect you can use to propel the conversation towards progress when you find yourself confronting an excuse are:

- "How are you going to..." which you then follow up with the appropriate question.
- "How are you going to get the document that you need from the client?"
- "How are you going to handle that moving forward?"
- "How are you going to fit that into your calendar?"

"How" isn't the only word that can be used here, but it's a good way to start.

Other good "opening" words to eliminate closed conversations are:

- **Who**
 - "Who do you need to assist you with that?"
 - "Who would you prefer to partner with?"
- **What**
 - "What resources can we allocate to you so this gets done?"
 - "What is the timeframe you're looking at for completion?"
 - "What obstacles do you foresee in your way?"
- **When**
 - "When is a reasonable time frame to complete this?"
 - "When would you like to check in again on this?"
- **Where**
 - "Where do you think this would be presented?"
 - "Where is the best location to build x..."
 - "Where are you currently working on this?"

You can customize the question depending on the context, but the entire point is to drive the conversation forward toward change by utilizing an open conversation that forces the other individual to co-create the accountability plan with you.

We practice these situations regularly in [The Academy](#). Come check it out if you can see that practicing these skills would be beneficial for you.

THE FOUR EXCUSES

And how to handle them



IT'S NOT MY FAULT

- AVOID:** Debating whether it is or not
- ADDRESS:** "There are often things that aren't our fault but are still our responsibility"
- REDIRECT:** "How are you going to...."

I'M ON IT NOW

- AVOID:** Sending them out to 'fix it' without knowing exactly what they'll change
- ADDRESS:** "I'm glad you agree this is important, let's talk about how..."
- REDIRECT:** "How are you going to...."

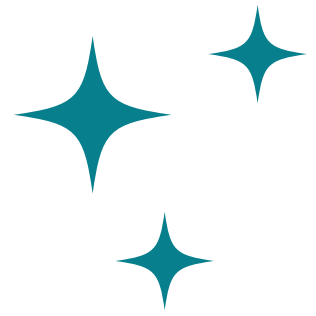
I DIDN'T KNOW

- AVOID:** Debating whether they should have known or not
- ADDRESS:** "Now that you do know...."
- REDIRECT:** "How are you going to...."

THAT'S NOT NORMAL

- AVOID:** Accepting the dismissal or escalating with tone
- ADDRESS:** "It's more common than you may realize and it's important we work through it. How are..."
- REDIRECT:** "How are you going to...."

YOU CAN DO THIS



But you need to keep going

Excuses don't have to be hard. As mentioned before, we all use them, and there's no way to eliminate them. They will be a part of your day, but you can equip yourself to handle them by anticipating them and swiftly, confidently, and effectively moving through them towards excellence.

They don't have to derail your day or your emotions.

Along the way, you'll condition your people to realize that excuses aren't very effective with you, and you'll observe that they will make fewer of them.

Your ability to do this well will be a function of how familiar you become at quickly identifying the excuse, how well you control your tone and cadence, and what words you say.

All of this material - what to say, how to say it, and what to listen for comes out of a course called **The Language of Leadership**.

Thousands of leadership situations have been made simple with The Language of Leadership.

I highly recommend you explore the entire course - you can get started in it for free [Here](#).

Everyone who takes the course asks me the same thing: "[How do I get good at this?](#)" And my response is always, "[You have to practice.](#)" Leadership is a skill, and skills require practice.

So, I created a safe space for leaders to practice these things—what to say, how to say them, and what to listen for in *The Academy*. Professionals in every other profession spend a considerable amount of time practicing off the field, so that when it's game time they can perform at a high level.

In *The Academy*, you can rehearse and try out these concepts with other people in positions of leadership like yourself. Professionals practice their craft, and The Academy is the place for you to practice like a professional leader.

It's called The Language of Leadership Academy. [You can learn more about it here.](#)

Good Job Investing in yourself as a leader - keep going!

[Check Out The Academy](#)

[Check Out The Course](#)



ERIK BERGLUND

Founder

I help leaders develop the habit of speaking the Language of Leadership.

With this habit, leaders get out of the Chief Problem Solver role and build effective teams, earning back their time by empowering their people.

I spent a decade leading teams and struggling to answer the question - "How do you hold people accountable?". Once I learned the answer, my team performed better, I got my time back, and I enjoyed my job more.

I used that experience to build The Language of Leadership and The Academy, where Leaders refine what they say, how they say it, and what they listen for.

Come check it out.