

# Respond to Excuses With Force

**Warning:** The way you respond to your employees' excuses may actually encourage them to feed you more excuses. If you readily accept their reasons for being late, missing deadlines or not following directions, you can expect more problems.

A better way to deal with excuses is to listen and then look ahead. Follow this three-step process to alert your staff that their cop-outs won't work:

**Play the detective.** When you hear an excuse, keep quiet. Let the speaker finish. Study his facial expressions, voice tone and gestures. Does the person appear agitated, guilty or sad?

In these moments, you can gain clues to the psychological makeup of your employees. Some glib talkers will justify their blunders by concocting an elaborate set of events that sound too implausible to fabricate. Others might blink, cover their mouth when speaking and adopt a nervous tic—all subtle signs that they're lying.

**Acknowledge and question.** After the speaker finishes, say "I understand" in a neutral tone. (If the excuse involves a tragedy like a relative's death, then "I'm sorry" is more appropriate.) Then ask softly, "Is there anything else you want to add?"

This puts the burden on your employees to examine their behavior more closely. Mediocre performers will repeat themselves or insert more "facts" relating to their excuse. But winners who made a mistake will not dwell on what happened; they will add how they intend to prevent such an error or incident from happening again.

**Look ahead.** Don't argue with the employee about the merits of the excuse. And don't waste too much time digging for more information to judge its validity. Instead, seek agreement on an action plan. Get your employee to commit to taking responsibility to fix what broke or bounce back from a setback.