

Little Fibs That Cause Big Trouble

BY SANDY MAYNARD

We all do it. Telling a little fib can save time, save face, and make those difficult days on the job just a little easier to cope with. But sometimes little fibs can backfire—and we can find ourselves in a big heap of trouble.

Not long ago I responded to a letter from an *ADDitude* reader who was on vacation. She had promised her boss she would work on a project over the summer and have it ready for him the first day she was back in the fall. It was the last two weeks of summer and she was away on holiday, not having completed the project that was due immediately upon her return. There was no way she could finish it on time, so she asked me what she should tell her boss when she got back. My advice was to call him immediately and let him know that the project would not be ready. Saying nothing for two weeks was not a good option. It would be a fib of silence that would ultimately cause her even greater problems, and it was disrespectful of the other person's responsibilities. Giving her boss a two-week heads-up could help to avoid last-minute complications and provide him with an opportunity to do some damage control. Not saying anything, on the other hand, would lead her boss to expect that everything was fine when it wasn't.

Below are five little fibs to avoid, along with substitute responses that will serve both you and the other person involved. Remember, practice makes perfect. The natural inclination is to fib just a little to buy more time, appear in control, or just plain avoid the issue. The substitute responses will be difficult at first, but the more you practice, the easier it gets.

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FIB #1: "No Problem!" (THE I-WANT-TO-LOOK-GOOD FIB)

How many times have we said this? When someone makes a request that means a problem or an inconvenience for you, say so politely. Avoid using the word *but*. The word, by definition, negates what is said before it. Saying, "That's a wonderful idea, but..." is the same as telling someone that their request is a bad idea.

Sometimes you won't catch yourself before you fib, but a second chance may present itself if your colleague says, "Are you sure you can do it?" or "That's not too much trouble, is it?" Calling the next day to say you spoke too soon is also quite all right.

FIB #2: "Anytime is fine." (THE NICE-GUY FIB)

Respecting your own time is paramount to improving your time management skills. We all want to be liked, but going easy on others at your own expense is not the best way to achieve that. When soliciting the help of a co-worker, agree on a definite deadline.

If you forget to assign a deadline or just couldn't gather the courage to do so, follow up with a phone call or e-mail right away.

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Substitute Response

"That's a wonderful idea. Unfortunately, I have a backlog of work and would be unable to help you out on that."

"On second thought, I won't be able to do this for you. Is there someone else you can ask?"

Substitute Response

"Friday afternoon is the latest."

"I forgot to give you a deadline, but I need the results by Friday. Contact me ASAP if there's a problem, so I can make other arrangements."

FIB #3: “It’s coming along just fine.” (THE PRETENDING FIB)

Honesty is the best policy. Your honesty may be returned with a similarly honest reply, accompanied by a useful suggestion.

Whether your boss responds favorably or otherwise, engage him by acknowledging your difficulty in completing the project and ask for guidance. Bosses who have “been there, done that” are an underutilized resource for suggestions to help us do our jobs more proficiently. Your boss may say, “I know what you mean, I used to dread doing that. I found that if I did [such and such], it wasn’t quite so bad.”

FIB #4: “I’ll do it first thing Monday morning.” (THE GOOD-INTENTION FIB)

Monday mornings can be crazy. Our intentions might be good, but sometimes we need to do a reality check before we make promises, even to ourselves. We have to assess just how much we can and cannot do in any given day.

FIB #5: Saying nothing (THE SILENT FIB)

Pretending things are all right when we know differently is the most subversive fib of all, and it usually ends up hurting the fibber the most. If an assignment is unclear, ask for clarification. If you suspect that a situation at work (or in your personal life) affects your ability to complete a project as planned, mention it as soon as possible.

Substitute Response

“Quite frankly, I’ve been avoiding it like the plague. Can you suggest a way to start?”

“I respect and admire your knowledge and expertise with these things, and I was hoping you would have some good tips for me.”

Substitute Response

“Which day would be the best day to work on this?” or “I have a lot on my plate early in the week. Would Wednesday work for you?”

Substitute Response

“Would you clarify this point for me, so I can make sure to give you what you need?” or “I can see that I won’t make the Friday deadline on this. The following Tuesday seems more reasonable. Does that work for you?”