

*by Boyd Byers*

## Lies and the Liars Who Tell Them

What do Elvis, Jesus, and Jesse James have in common? All of them, according to various conspiracy theorists and crackpots, faked their deaths.

Many less-well-known people have in fact played dead to collect on insurance claims, avoid debts, or escape the law. But would anyone stoop so low as to lie about the death of her child just to get out of work for a few days? If you've been in HR for a long time, you can probably guess the answer.

### ***Don't believe everything you read***

A couple who worked for Tyson Foods in Waterloo, Iowa, recently were foiled in their plot to cover their absences with a fake obituary. James Snyder and Mary Jo Jensen, who are boyfriend and girlfriend, falsely reported the death of Jensen's 17-year-old son, police said.

Snyder and Jensen started taking time off work, according to court records, saying the teenager was sick and in the hospital. As time passed, the scam escalated — as scams tend to do — and they told their employer the boy was on life support and, later, had died. When Snyder and Jensen took several days off work for funeral leave, company officials asked them to verify their absences. So Snyder went to the local paper and placed a false obituary to try to satisfy their employer, court records say. The obituary said the teen had died at the Mayo Clinic in Minnesota after a lengthy illness.

News of the boy's death came as quite a shock to those who knew him — particularly when friends saw him eating at a local restaurant a week later. Police arrested Snyder and Jensen in connection with the bogus obituary. Court records show both Snyder and Jensen now work for different employers.

### ***Numbers don't lie (but people do)***

Dishonesty about absenteeism is more common than you might think. Forty-three percent of American workers admitted to calling in sick with a bogus excuse within the past year, according to a 2005 survey by CareerBuilder.com. Interestingly, 41 percent of employees who faked being sick think their bosses knew they were faking it. Dishonest employees, it seems, aren't necessarily naive employees. The good news? More than three-fourths of the workers who fake being sick do it only on rare occasions (or so they say).

So why the deceit? Half of the fakers played hooky because they needed a break or rest or mental health day. Nearly a quarter who pretended they were ill skipped work to care for a family member who really was sick.

What can you do to deter employees from lying to skip work? There are several ways to deal with the problem. Which one or combination works best for your company depends on your workforce and culture.

- **Law and order.** Implement, communicate, and enforce attendance and disciplinary policies. Make sure your discipline policy includes “lying or providing false information to company officials” or something to that effect in the list of offenses. Require employees to provide a note from a health care provider to justify medical-related absences (but be sure to coordinate and comply with the Family and Medical Leave Act if you have 50 or more employees).
- **Kinder and gentler.** Take away the need or incentive to lie. Do this by combining vacation and sick leave as paid time off (PTO). PTO policies are popular because they require only one bank of paid leave to track and because employees are less likely to take unplanned “sick” days if they know it will cut into their “vacation” days. Or if you want to keep sick days and vacation separate, expand sick leave to include absences to care for sick family members. Or give everyone a couple of free personal days every year to use when they need a mental break.
- **What, me worry?** If unexcused absences aren’t a major problem for your company, accept the fact that some employees, even good and usually honest ones, will tell little white lies once in a while. Don’t worry about infrequent offenders, but be prepared to crack down if things get out of hand.

### ***She said it***

*It’s such an embarrassing topic that nobody will ever challenge it. It’s one of those things that men honestly have no clue about, and women can sympathize with.*

— Jennifer Newman, Vice President of Lippe Taylor Public Relations, on why “I have cramps” is a good excuse for missing work (as reported on monster.com).