
LIAR! LIAR! YOUR PANTS ARE ON FIRE: DECEPTIVE COMMUNICATION IN THE WORKPLACE

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ABSTRACT

We live with lies in the workplace every day. From everyday paperclips to the billions in corporate accounts and from the hollow commitments made to new recruits to the increasingly wistful search for the relationship between performance and reward, work is a showcase for human duplicity. And, anyone under enough pressure, or given enough incentive, will lie. Lies, for the most part, are more prevalent in the business world than at home because the work environment is viewed more impersonally. In the workplace, where high performance is everything, lies are told to put a better light on a situation or a result, to justify an action, to be reassuring, or for our own protection. And the cost of dishonesty ranges from \$6 billion to as much as \$200 billion annually in the United States. This paper will give a definition of lying, discuss who lies and the reasons why people lie, describe if people can actually detect lies, discuss the costs of lying in business, and describe what managers can do to help their organizations.

INTRODUCTION

"A lie would have no sense unless the truth was felt as dangerous."

Alfred Adler

Several centuries before the era of suspicion and performance indicators, the French philosopher Blaise Pascal noted that "mutual cheating is the foundation of society." Today, anyone who works knows what he means. From everyday paperclips to the billions in corporate accounts; and from the hollow commitments made to new recruits, to the increasingly wistful search for the relationship between performance and reward, work is a showcase for human duplicity (Overell, 2003). Deception is a pervasive element of daily working life. Sometimes it is an official part of one's work. Workplace cultures socialize individuals into using deception as a tool in performing their everyday work (Shulman, 2006). We live with lies in the workplace every day. There are the lies we use to ease out of an uncomfortable situation. "I have to leave now, got to pick up the kids at day care." "My boss insists we rotate suppliers, so we won't be doing business with you this

year.” “No, that stain on your tie isn’t noticeable.” Often we don’t refer to these statements as lies, but as fibs, which sounds gentler and less deceptive. After awhile, however, we have trouble distinguishing between reality and the embroidered information we have put out to the world (Penson, 1997). This paper will give a definition of lying, discuss who lies and the reasons why people lie, describe if people can actually detect lies, discuss the costs of lying in business, and describe what managers can do to help their organizations.

BACKGROUND

“Oh what a tangled web we weave when first we practice to deceive.”

Sir Walter Scott

In English medieval courts truth was tested by ordeals of fire and water, on the basis a truthful person would be protected by God. Someone suspected of lying would have to carry a red-hot iron bar for nine paces. Alternatively, s/he could opt to walk across nine red-hot ploughshares. Either way, if the suspect was burned, then this was proof that s/he was lying and so could be promptly hanged. Other courts went in for trial by water. In the ultimate “no-win” situation, the person accused of lying was put into a sack and thrown into a pond. If the accused sank, this showed s/he was innocent, but s/he might drown anyway. If s/he floated, this was taken as proof that s/he was lying and s/he would be hanged (A Brief History, 2002).

In the 19th Century, a “new science” called phrenology entailed measuring “bumps” on a person’s skull. Supposedly, it led to the idea that lies could be detected by looking at physical symptoms. In the 20th century, the search for “scientific” ways of spotting liars moved from bumps on the head to brain chemistry, with the search for a “truth serum” drug. In 1963, The US Supreme Court said “serum-induced confession” was in effect a form of torture and the practice was ruled unconstitutional. In the 21st Century, makers of the latest lie detector machine which measures supposedly tell-tale changes in temperature around the eye sockets when somebody is telling a deliberate untruth claim a success rate of 83% in detecting liars. Whether it will prove any more reliable than a conventional polygraph which relies on sensors to detect breathing rate, pulse, blood pressure and perspiration, remains open to question (A Brief History, 2002).

Whether it is being told that the person you want to speak to is “in a meeting” or large scale fraud resulting in the collapse of an entire organization, failing to tell the truth is an aspect of the business world you ignore at your peril (Michalczyk, 1999).

DEFINITION OF LYING

“Half the truth is often a great lie.”

Benjamin Franklin

Lying is “any intentional deceptive message in the form of a statement” (Minkler & Miceli, 2004). An “official” lie actually misleads, deliberately conveying a false impression. So complimenting a friend’s awful haircut or telling a creditor that the check is in the mail both qualify. Although we are socialized from the time we can speak to believe that it is always better to tell the truth, in reality, society often encourages and even rewards deception. Show up late for an early morning meeting at work, and it is best not to admit that you overslept. You are punished far more than you would be if you lie and say you were stuck in traffic. Moreover, lying is integral to many occupations. Think how often we see lawyers constructing farfetched theories on behalf of their clients or reporters misrepresenting themselves in order to gain access to good stories (Kornet, 1997). Lies are typically motivated by a desire to persuade others to act or to refrain from acting in a certain manner, or to make decisions in one’s favor. Sex, money, status, power, love, anything desired can provide temptation to kill, steal or lie. But lies can be motivated by nothing other than the creation of a false (misleadingly favorable or unfavorable) image or the fabrication of an entertaining story (Best, 2007).

WHO LIES?

“A liar should have a good memory.”

Quintilian

Anyone under enough pressure, or given enough incentive, will lie. Frequent liars tend to be manipulative and Machiavellian not to mention overly concerned with the impression they make on others. Also, liars not always fit the stereotype of caring only about themselves. Research reveals that extroverted, sociable people are slightly more likely to lie and that some personality and physical traits, notably self-confidence and physical attractiveness have been linked to an individual’s skill at lying when under pressure (Kornet, 1997). Lying has long been a part of everyday life. Most people lie once or twice a day, almost as often as they snack from the refrigerator or brush their teeth. Both men and women lie in approximately a fifth of their social exchanges lasting 10 or more minutes. Over the course of a week, they deceive about 30 percent of those with whom they interact one-on-one (Kornet, 1997).

Everyday lies are really part of the fabric of social life. A recent study showed that lying was more common in phone calls than in face-to-face chats. In addition, one lie in seven was discovered as far as the liars could tell. Also, a tenth of the lies were merely exaggeration, while 60 percent were outright deceptions. Most of the rest were subtle lies, often of omission. And finally, more than 70 percent of the liars said they would tell their lies again (The Real Truth, 1996).

The truth about lying is that we all do it much more than most of us care to admit. We nearly always deny lying because we are scared of being viewed as pathological liars and hence never being believed again (Bagaric, 2007). A recent survey of 2050 employees investigated the issue of lying in the workplace. The CareerBuilder survey indicated that 19% of workers admit they lied at

the office at least once a week (Miller, 2007). According to another study, people on average tell three lies for every 15 minutes of conversation (Bartolini, 2004). A study by Cyberslotz.co.uk found UK workers told more than 1.4 billion lies to their bosses in 2004, with more than two-thirds or 68% admitting to lying at least once a week (Workers Told, 2005).

Another survey found a nation of inventive cheats. There was the marketing manager who bought his wedding shoes on a company credit card; the office manager who sold a laptop computer he left out of a company audit; and the business consultant who extended a work-related stay at London's Savoy Hotel. In addition, a large majority of workers confessed they had taken stationery home or embellished their resumes (Overell, 2003)

Everyday examples of lying in the workplace include embellishing the truth on personal resumes and company track records; suggesting to customers that a product is better than it actually is; and promising bonuses, that never seem to arrive, to team members. Embellishing on a resume or company track record might not seem like a big deal until you realize how many people who rose to the top by this method also came crashing down when their lies were detected or it was discovered they could not actually do what they said they could (Wang & Kleiner, 2005). In fact, in several recent studies, the rate of lying on resumes or in job interviews was calculated to be 20 to 44 percent. That includes lies about past degrees, jobs, and responsibilities. For too many candidates, the desire to get ahead at all costs is more important than honesty. To help job seekers fabricate impressive backgrounds, a \$200 million industry has grown up to provide diplomas for any degree anywhere. A quick Google search on "purchase a fake diploma" yields more than 31,500 listings (Lying, 2007).

With the exception of politicians, perhaps no one fibs as beautifully as Alibi Network, a three-year-old service that provides elaborately constructed excuses for its clients. Whether you are looking to skip a day of work or to secretly leave town for the weekend, Alibi Network can provide fake airline receipts or phone calls to your boss explaining your absence and even mock up an entire itinerary for a bogus conference you were "attending." Rarely has lying been so creepily airtight. The Chicago-based company charges from \$75 for a simple phone call to thousands of dollars for extensive lying, on top of a \$75 annual fee. The most popular service is the "virtual hotel," in which the fibber can provide a boss or family member with the phone number of a hotel where he is supposed to be. After the telephone call is placed, one of Alibi's actors will answer the call as if a particular hotel has been reached. The incoming call then can be forwarded to the fibber's cellphone, making it seem as if he is in a certain city even though he is not. Although the pronoun "he" is used, half of Alibi's members are female (Tucker, 2007).

REASONS FOR LYING

"Ask me no questions, and I'll tell you no lies."

Oliver Goldsmith

Lies are more prevalent in the business world than at home because the work environment is viewed more impersonally. In the workplace, where high performance is everything, lies are told to put a better light on a situation or a result, to justify an action, to be reassuring, or for our own protection. Because it is not uncommon to see lies rewarded in business, it can be difficult to convince ourselves and others that lying should be obliterated (Penson, 1991).

Another very common reason employees lie at work has to do with appeasing customers; this is the motivation for lying in 26 percent of all cases. Covering up for failed projects and mistakes is the second most common reason for lying at work, making up 13 percent of all the lies told. Eight percent of the lies at work are done in order to explain tardiness and absence. Another 8 percent are lies told to cover up for another employee, whereas 5 percent are lies told with the intention of getting other employees in trouble or to look better than other employees in front of management. The most common reason for lying at work is to change the subject or avoid a topic. This includes denying knowledge of an event or situation, saying that a call will be returned, claiming that another call is coming through, or even that they were not present when certain information was sent out (Why Lying Exists, 2007).

Other common reasons that people lie include:

- ◆ Fear – people are trying to avoid punishment for something they have done or perceived they have done.
- ◆ Habitual fear – in this case people are in constant fear of being punished and it becomes a reflex or habit. In this case they insist the lie is the truth. This is called compulsive lying.
- ◆ Modeling – someone sees another person lying and getting away with it, and s/he becomes more prone to lying.
- ◆ Reward – in this case the truth won't get you what you want, so you use a lie to get the reward or goal (Miller, 2007).

There are short and long-term effects of making excuses at work. Poorly offered excuses, such as blaming others or telling half-truths, are not believable and cast doubt on a person's character. Giving excuses too often undermines a person's reputation by making him/her seem self-absorbed, unreliable or unknowledgeable (Sciranka, 2001).

Deception occurs frequently in everyday workplace communications, so managers and employees should be on their guard (How to Tackle, 2007).

DETECTING LIES

"Some people can't tell a lie; others can't tell the truth, and unfortunately most people can't tell the difference."

Most of us are not very good at spotting if someone is lying. Even people whose job it is to detect deception like police officers, FBI agents, and judges perform, on average, little better than if they had taken a guess. In a review of 253 studies, the overall accuracy hovers around 53 percent. That is hardly better than flipping a coin (Persaud, 2005). One of the biggest myths about body language is the belief that eye contact, or lack of it, exposes a liar. Even when presented with evidence to the contrary, many of us still suspect that liars out themselves by averting their eyes. It is very hard to surrender the belief that eye contact is a test of character. Far more reliable than eye contact is tone of voice. With the exception of sociopaths, who are expert liars, most people sound tense, their voices highly pitched, when they fib (Lawson, 2006).

By studying large groups of participants, researchers have identified certain general behaviors that liars are more likely to exhibit than are people telling the truth. Fibbers tend to move their arms, hands, and fingers less and blink less than people telling the truth do. The extra effort needed to remember what they have already said and to keep their stories consistent may cause liars to restrain their movements and fill their speech with pauses. People shading the truth tend to make fewer speech errors than truth tellers do, and they rarely backtrack to fill in forgotten or incorrect details (Lock, 2004). And finally, researchers in the medical sciences claim to have identified a “Pinocchio effect,” that is, an involuntary engorging of nasal tissues whenever one tells a lie (Litz, 2003). Yet, people don’t seem to be very good at spotting deception signals. Human accuracy is really just barely better than chance (Lock, 2004).

With regard to lie detection, there is a new computer program called “The Silent Talker.” This program, developed by the University of Manchester, uses a camera and artificial intelligence to process patterns of nonverbal behavior. In a pilot study, Silent Talker correctly classified 80% of responses as true or false. With the Silent Talker, there is no biased and irrational human subjectivity, so the system is more likely able to extract the true emotion, personality, behavior, or medical state to offer results that are better, fairer and truer (Cristol, 2003).

COSTS OF LYING

“The liar’s punishment is not in the least that he is not believed, but that he cannot believe anyone else.”

George Bernard Shaw

Undetected lies of prospective or current employees cost business billions of dollars a year. The ability to detect these lies would be of immense benefit. In fact, the costs of applicant dishonesty and employee misconduct are difficult to calculate yet estimates range from \$6 billion to as much as \$200 billion annually in the United States (Walczyk, et. al., 2005). In addition, credibility is a form of wealth. Everyone has access to some credibility. If credibility is squandered, believers are less readily available. And if one wishes to be believed when speaking the truth, one

must have credibility. Lying about one matter makes it easier to lie about others. Lies often require more lies to shore up the false impressions. The costs of lying are, indeed, high (Best, 2007).

Being a liar has other costs. People won't trust you, you can't remember the lies; you need to justify them. Since humans lie with some frequency, it is relevant to consider the costs of lies on the liars and on others. We don't trust people who lie to us. The victims of liars exact revenge, even if it costs the victims. When negotiating over money, for example, people give better deals, in repeated interactions to people who have been honest, and the worst deals to those who have directly lied. Tarnishing a long-term relationship has a particularly high cost for business operations that rely on repeated interactions (Grover, 2005).

WHAT CAN MANAGERS DO TO HELP?

"It is hard to tell if a man is telling the truth when you know you would lie if you were in his place."

H. L. Mencken

How can managers get workers to cut down on their lies? First, employers need to take some of the blame for workplace lies. People do not like lying, so much so that it produces physiological changes in their bodies. Employers need to ensure they create an environment that recognizes and accepts unchangeable aspects of the human condition. People are not machines. We all have lapses in motivation and attention to detail and, accordingly, we make mistakes. At other times, we just want to take time out for a day or so to attend to personal matters. Employers who run the mantra that work is No. 1 and that nothing short of perfection is acceptable set themselves up for being fed a litany of lies. It is in such an environment that people hide mistakes and take time out without forewarning (Bagaric, 2007). The lessons learned from research on lying in organizations suggest the following:

- ◆ Lying is difficult to detect on the interpersonal level.
- ◆ Lying is partly caused by structural constraints and conflict.
- ◆ Lying is partly caused by individual differences.
- ◆ Lying is partly caused by reward structures (Grover, 2005).

Eighty-five percent of managers say they will not promote someone who is caught lying. Being deceitful can impact a career, and bosses and coworkers can easily begin to distrust you. Honesty is still the best policy.

CONCLUSION

"The lie is a condition of life."

Friedrich Nietzsche

Current stories of inflated reports of corporate assets, outright lies by the federal government, sexual abuse by priests, along with continuing lies in other spheres of social life, raise the questions about the short-term and long-term consequences of deception. Certainly, anyone who insists on condemning all lies should ponder what would happen if we could reliably tell when our family, friends, colleagues, and government leaders were deceiving us. It is tempting to think that the world would become a better place when purged of the deceptions that seem to interfere with our attempts at genuine communication or intimacy. Yet, perhaps our social lives would collapse under the weight of relentless honesty, with unveiled truths destroying our ability to connect with others. The ubiquity of lying is clearly a problem, but would we really want to will away all of our lies?

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