



Using Effective Leadership Strategies in the Workplace

The Truth, the Whole Truth, and Nothing but the Truth

Dr. Robert K. Bitting

"Lying isn't a good idea in non-work situations because bad things can happen if you get caught. But when you're dealing with employees, they have few retaliatory options as long as you keep the supply cabinet locked. And if you lose their trust, you can always use fear and intimidation to get the same results. There's no real risk."

- Dogbert (a.k.a. Scott Adams) -

Is it ever justifiable to lie? What if it's just "coloring the truth"? How about lying in a business situation? Have you ever lied to a customer, a boss, or a co-worker? Have you ever called in sick to work when you were well enough to go in? If you said no to any of the above, you're lying, even though most of you would say that you affirm honesty, and reject lying at all costs.

Don't worry, you're not alone. Dogbert notwithstanding, the fact is that I lie. You lie. We all lie. To each other, and to ourselves. Not all the time, but a lot. We all know we do it, and encourage others to do it, too. (How's my hair look? - please say it looks good; Great outfit! - leisure suits must be making a comeback; I'll have that report done by Wednesday - I didn't say which year). However, lying is generally considered to be unethical behavior. Therefore, if we can better understand what it means to lie (one type of deception), why we do it, when we do it, and with whom we do it, we can learn how to interact more effectively with others in both our professional and personal lives. After all, no one wants to hear the truth all the time. Hearing the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth can have serious, and highly undesirable, consequences.

In a recent Associated Press article, Maggie Jackson sites information from the Ethics Officers Association and the American Society of Chartered Life Underwriters and Chartered Financial Consultants, which surveyed 1,324 workers. Results pointed to the pressure-cooker atmosphere at many workplaces as the major culprit in pressuring people to act "unethically". Faced with the demands of overtime, balancing work and family, and downsizing, workers feel more stress than five years ago, resulting in increasing percentages of employees who say that they regularly cut corners on quality, cover up incidents, abuse or lie about sick days, and lie to or deceive customers.

According to Dr. David Nyberg, author of The Naked Truth: Truth-Telling and Deception in Everyday Life, this type of behavior is often a necessary function of mental health, one of the mind's many weapons against stress, uncertainty, and chaos. Nyberg suggests that an occasional lie can be helpful, healthy, creative, and, in some situations, even downright moral. One of Nyberg's central premises is that we should tell the truth selectively and deceive with discretion, so that others can find reason for self-respect and be spared suffering whenever possible. In other words, in truth telling, as in everything else, moderation is a virtue (for example, just think of the things that we tell, or don't tell, to our children).

Nyberg goes on to identify three "jobs" that most of us have at work: learning to behave in such a way as to enhance the likelihood of praise and reduce the likelihood of punishment; publicizing positive evaluations and concealing negative ones; and learning how to satisfy two audiences at the same time by being "a good worker and a good guy". Given these pressures, a little creative truth-telling seems inevitable. Learning how to make it at work involves, in part, learning how to falsify our behavior in certain circumstances. Ironically, people will say almost anything to gain a reputation for honesty.

Outright lying is one form of deception, as is telling partial truths, or not saying anything. According to Dr. Charles V. Ford, MD, every manager is faced with the "yes-man" phenomenon - people who will do or say anything to please you, even if it means lying about what they really think. Other forms of lying by employees are over-promising and claiming to have done things that have not yet been accomplished.

Good managers, according to Dr. Ford, should routinely examine their own unconscious wishes to be deceived and flattered, especially when seeking feedback about their own ideas. If you really want honest feedback, you need to give your employees permission to tell the truth. For example, instead of presenting your solution to a problem and asking for an opinion, say you have a possible solution and would appreciate hearing alternatives. Remember, the reason we are not used to telling the truth is that we are not used to facing it.

So there you have it, the whole truth on truth - or at least enough to get you thinking. And though it's not as straightforward as we may like, many of the ethical dilemmas surrounding truth-telling and deception in the workplace can be reduced, mostly through better communications and a serious commitment by managers to create a employee-friendly environment that encourages risk-taking, the sharing of ideas, and creative problem-solving.

The truth is, some deception is good. Honest.

Contact Robert K. Bitting To Learn More About This Topic

Phone: (607) 587-8830

Cell: (607) 382-8383

E-mail: training@RobertBitting.com

Website: www.RobertBitting.com