



## Honesty: The Plain and Simple Truth

OCTOBER 15, 2013

What would happen if lying were the norm? Spouses wouldn't be able to **trust** one another; leaders wouldn't be credible; and the news would be meaningless. Everything, and I mean everything, depends on honesty. That's why it's so critical to tell the whole truth and nothing but the truth.

The truth is . . . we can't build relationships if we mistrust what friends say; we won't follow leaders if we mistrust what they do; and we can't make good decisions if we doubt the accuracy of the information that we receive. Absent truth, instead of taking action, we'd spend our time looking over other people's shoulders, second-guessing their intent, and unraveling the facts from the falsehoods. The result is that trust is shattered, **reputations** are damaged, and suspicion rules the day.

So, why do people lie? The reasons are countless. People lie to make themselves look better, steal the credit, cover up poor performance, conceal mistakes, deflect the blame, protect their reputations, and deceive and manipulate people. Regardless of the motive, the ultimate results are the same. As someone once said, "The worst thing about being lied to is knowing you're not worth the truth."

### The Truth Is Not What It Seems, But What It Is

Dishonesty comes in many shapes and sizes. Of course, some people *lie in error*, in which they wholeheartedly believe their words when they're spoken. Others tell bold-faced lies, knowing full well that they're being deceitful. And still other people tell *white lies*, hoping to protect someone (often themselves) from the truth. Yet even though some of these folks may be well intentioned, it's all lying just the same. How do you identify a lie? As a general rule of thumb, if your ears hear one thing and your eyes see another, use your brain — because something is obviously

wrong. Here are some common forms of dishonesty that masquerade as acceptable behavior:

**Misrepresentation.** Distorting facts to consciously mislead or create a false impression. Spinning the truth, presenting opinion as fact, and using revisionist thinking or euphemisms to masquerade the truth are all forms of misrepresentation.

**Omission.** Leaving out key information to intentionally deceive someone. As Benjamin Franklin said, "Half the truth is often a great lie."

**Fabrication.** Deliberately inventing an untruth or spreading a falsehood such as gossip or a rumor.

**Exaggeration.** Stretching the truth to give a more favorable impression.

**Denial.** Refusing to acknowledge the truth or to accept responsibility for a mistake or falsehood that was made.

**Lack of transparency.** Withholding information knowing that full disclosure will have negative consequences.

**Redirection.** Deflecting blame to another person to prevent personal embarrassment or responsibility.

**False recognition.** Stealing the credit for someone else's hard-earned success.

**Broken promise.** Making a **promise** with no intention of keeping it.

**Cover-up.** Protecting the misdeeds of others. Those who provide cover for the misdeeds of others are as guilty as those who perpetrate the "crime."

**Hypocrisy.** Saying one thing and consciously doing another. When words don't match actions, someone is being dishonest with others or themselves.

**Bait and switch.** Attracting someone with an exciting offer only to divert them to an inferior deal.

**Living a lie.** Pretending that you are something you're not.

It's simple.  
Never lie to someone  
who trusts you,  
and never trust  
someone who  
lies to you.

Any way you cut it, when people distort the truth, they put their credibility at risk, while lowering their personal standards of honesty. Remember, BIG or small . . . a lie is a lie. Furthermore, a lie repeated many times doesn't change the truth. Additionally, one or many believers don't determine the truth or untruth. There's no excuse for dishonesty. None. As someone once said, "The truth doesn't cost anything, but a lie could cost you everything."

### Truth Be Told

The value of honesty cannot be overstated. Every time someone lies, alarm bells aren't going to go off and that person's nose isn't going to get larger (like Pinocchio's), but something definitely happens. The liar may suspect that the only reason the customer said, "yes" to his proposal, the only way she dodged the blame, and the only reason the recipient of the lie thought highly of him or her was due to the lie itself. The question remains: Even though they fooled someone else, how do liars feel about themselves? The obvious truth is that they thought they didn't deserve the outcome or else they would have told the truth in the first place. They may explain away the lie by telling themselves that everybody does it or that the lie fell in a gray area. But I must ask you, is that any way to live your life?

When you stand for honesty, you believe in yourself and everything you represent. When you stand for honesty, everything you say carries the voice of credibility. But, when you're dishonest, your soiled reputation will do the speaking for you.

There are several things you can do to demonstrate honesty:

- Think before you speak.
- Say what you mean and mean what you say.
- Bend over backward to communicate in an open and honest fashion.
- Simplify your statements so that everyone clearly understands your message.
- Tell it like it is, rather than sugarcoating it.
- Present both sides of each issue to engender objectivity.

- If you have a personal bias or a conflict of interest, make it known.
- Tell people the rationale behind your decisions so that your intent is understood.
- If something is misinterpreted, quickly correct the record.
- Don't shoot the messenger when someone tells *you* the truth. Thank them for *their* honesty and treat the information provided as a gift.
- Willingly accept responsibility by admitting a mistake or an error in judgment — in a timely fashion.
- Hold people accountable when their **words do not match their actions**.
- Never compromise your integrity and reputation by associating yourself with people whose standards of integrity you mistrust.

The truth shouldn't be told only when it's convenient. Honesty must be a way of life. Honesty means that you care deeply about trust, cherish your relationships, and value the importance of a solid reputation. Honesty means that you try to do your best and are willing to accept the consequences of your actions. Honesty means that you respect others enough to tell them the truth and that you value your opinion of yourself enough to never live a lie. As the saying goes, "It's simple. Never lie to someone who trusts you, and never trust someone who lies to you." That's why it's critical to always tell the truth — or the truth will tell on you. Honest. ●

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Frank Sonnenberg, a marketing strategist, has written four books and published over 300 articles. *Managing with a Conscience (2nd edition)* is recognized as one of the top 10 Small Business Books of 2012 • Trust Across America named Sonnenberg one of the Top 100 Thought Leaders of 2011, 2012 and 2013 • Sonnenberg was nominated as one of America's Most Influential Small Business Experts of 2012 • In 2011, *Social Media Marketing Magazine* (SMM) selected Sonnenberg as one of the top marketing authors in the world on Twitter. [www.franksonnenbergonline.com](http://www.franksonnenbergonline.com) | Personal Values • Personal Responsibility ©2013 Frank Sonnenberg. All rights reserved.