

Workplace Deception

Paying a Potential High Price

By **Conner O'Seanery**

Imagine walking into the office to find your workstation stripped of pens and stationary and your computer display bolted to the desk. Imagine haggling with your co-workers over the division of labor for an upcoming project, wondering if they'll undermine your hard work by not living up to their end of the bargain. Imagine putting in a full work week, not knowing whether you'll be paid for your time.

Welcome to a world without trust.

Steve Knack, a senior economist with the World Bank, has studied the economic impact of trust for over a decade. He concludes it is worth \$12.4 trillion a year to the U.S. economy, or 99.5% of the income generated from coast to coast.

That's a lot of money riding on a five-letter word. And even more worrying, it can all be jeopardized by a simple four-letter word that is growing ever more commonplace: lies.

Deception has reached epidemic proportions in modern society. Think that's a lie? Consider these grim statistics:

- Psychologist Gerald Jellison concludes most people encounter **200 fibs and fabrications every single day**
- Using videotaped interactions among strangers, psychologist Robert Feldman discovered **60% of people lie an average of three times during 10 minutes** of conversation
- Nearly three-quarters of the thousands of students surveyed by the Josephson Institute of Ethics admit to being "serial liars" when it comes to saving money or getting jobs

Cold, clinical research isn't the only evidence pointing to deception's ever-deepening penetration. Watch any newscast or open any newspaper and you'll feel the warm, fuzzy tingle of "truthiness." Can we believe anything today?

Believe this: Indiana's workplaces aren't quarantined from this epidemic. To be brutally honest, any workplace is a Petri dish for growing a bumper crop of bald-faced lies. Here are five categories of lies we might encounter:

1. Lies to Avoid Hurting Others

"Little white lies" are among the most frequent fibs we encounter at work, and the least destructive. In fact, they are

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crucial for helping any workforce function smoothly.

Imagine, for example, an employee presents you with a budget that's missing obvious expenses for an upcoming project. Rather than speak your mind ("Bob, this budget is out to lunch. Are you on the sauce again?"), you employ a more constructive approach. ("This is a good first cut, Bob, but some key expenses are missing. You'll need to rework this.")

Bob, in turn, accepts your criticism graciously and keeps his true thoughts (which aren't nearly as gracious) to himself on being handed more work.

The result? A non-confrontational exchange of viewpoints, brought to you by the power of positive prevarications.

2. Lies to Boost Appeal and Likeability

The majority of employees in any workplace want to be liked. And lies can do for our personality what joint compound and a can of paint can do for a boring wall: smooth over the defects and create an attractive finish.

Appeal-boosting lies tend to be minimally destructive – unless taken to the extreme. Inside every office there lurks one employee who takes it too far. This individual's DayGlo® gloss colors every aspect of his being, making it impossible to see him in an honest light.

3. Lies to Avoid Negative Consequences

As children, we learn that lies can get us out of trouble, and we carry this comforting knowledge into adulthood. Slept in and missed an important meeting? Blame the power outage that knocked your alarm clock out of commission – and mysteriously affected only your house.

A frequent part of the lying landscape at work, this category of lies can be incredibly disruptive and destructive. Employees may use them to cover up their mistakes or shift blame to their fellow co-workers, igniting a firestorm of ill will.

4. Lies to Gain an Advantage

Lies for personal gain help boost our standing among the rank and file. They can be used to gain the right kind of attention for ourselves and draw the wrong kind of attention toward others.

Left untreated, they can also poison the atmosphere of trust crucial for successful teamwork and make it impossible for management to accurately identify top performers. The end result? Less than optimum performance by the business as a whole.

5. Lies to Cover Up Lies

One of the most frightening aspects of deception is the imperative it creates for more deception. In the workplace, this

Continued on page 94

Pass It On

Continued from page 92

exponential growth can create an environment in which everyone – and everything they do – is suspect. In such a dysfunctional setting, the pursuit of commerce and profits can be an impossible task.

Adam Smith, the father of modern economics, argued that wealth is built on a coherent division of labor. But a coherent division of labor is meaningless if workers can't trust each other. While lying down on the job may be all in a day's work for millions of employees, lying on the job can have more dire and far-reaching consequences.

INFORMATION LINK

Author: Conner O'Seanery is an expert on detecting deception and author of "You Won't Get Fooled at Work Again: 40 Timely Tips for Recognizing Deception in the Workplace" (The FingerTip Press, \$4.95), a guidebook to help business executives, managers and employees alike diagnose deceit. For more information, call (866) 994-TIPS or go to www.TheSerialLiar.com or www.TipsDigest.com