

Lying at Work (Part I)

You can imagine that philosophers have a grand time with the concept of lying, starting with trying to find a workable definition. Here is one that works:

A lie is a statement believed by the liar to be false, made to another person with the intention that the person be deceived by the statement.¹

Lying involves the question of trust, and can be explained this way: If I always tell the truth, you can trust me. If I never tell the truth, in a perverse way, you can trust me. If I tell the truth 90% of the time, ordinarily a good score, and I do not 10% of the time, I simply cannot be trusted. Is that true at work? Shouldn't it be?

Some well-meaning people think that it is to be expected that an ethical person at home, who insists that his family not lie, has a different set of expectations and therefore a different set of rules when he enters the workplace. They have the feeling that "success in modern life is next to impossible without the maneuvering room afforded by a bit of calculated vagueness here and a strategically bitten tongue there."²

If a business is to have an ethical culture, wouldn't that require everyone working there to always tell the truth? Or to put it differently, is it OK for an employee to lie in order to meet the financial expectations of her company?

So, for example, if management condones advertising that somehow goes over the line from mere puffing to lying, can the company be seen as an *ethical* company?

Or, if a businessman receives a telephone call from someone asking if he is capable of undertaking a particular job and he knowingly says that he can while knowing fully that he cannot, do he and his colleagues have an ethical problem?

Here is an instance of lying that is especially worth considering: If an executive seeking a job with a company lies on the resume in order to get a job, how much effect does that have on the ethical culture of the company?

And here is interesting information on this topic: About 16% of executive resumes contain false academic claims and/or material omissions relating to educational experience. Further, it can be deduced that as many as one-third of management-level resumes contain errors, exaggerations, material omissions, and/or blatant falsehoods.³

In a company that is really concerned about its culture, talking openly about lying and whether it is ever condoned seems to be a necessity and a first priority for management.

¹ *On Lying*, www.puaf.umd.edu/puaf650/supplement3.htm.

² Jeffrey L. Seglin, *Bosses Beware When Sending the Truth*, New York Times, December 20, 1998.

³ Joseph Daniel McCool, *Making It By Faking It*, Business Week Online, October 14, 2007.