

## Truth, Lies and Leadership

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**By Michael Reddington, guest contributor**

While urban myths indicate shifty eyes, sweaty palms or a change in vocal pitch as signs of lying, in reality, dishonesty does not always cause changes in behavior. Furthermore, identifying a lie through behavioral fluctuations is never as simple as seeing someone avert eye contact, scratch their face or squirm. In fact, no behavior is always indicative of truth or deception, and many researchers agree the average person has about a 50-50 chance at distinguishing honesty from dishonesty in a conversation.

While current research in this area is largely correct, it often does not take in to account several factors that can increase successful identification of dishonesty, including a person's training to evaluate behavior, establishing behavioral norms and asking follow-up questions. These factors contribute to the process of identifying clues to potential dishonesty. It is a complex process that can be learned, implemented and repeated in many settings which can give business leaders an advantage in negotiations, sales calls and other leadership conversations.

Quite often liars' behavior will betray them, as the stress related to lying leads to behavior leakage. Stress factors include the liar, the recipient, the relationship between the two people, the likelihood the recipient will identify the lie and the perceived consequences of getting caught. For example, if a person is not a practiced liar, is worried about damaging the relationship with the recipient, feels the recipient could identify the lie, and believes the punishment for the lie could be great, it is likely behavioral leakage indicating dishonesty will be exhibited.

Attempting to pinpoint dishonesty draws several concerns, the most significant being confirmation biases. This occurs when people try so hard to catch a lie. They convince themselves they are seeing cues that do not exist. A second concern is the effect persistent attempts at lie-catching has on relationships as it is very difficult to maintain relationships if people are constantly trying to determine if someone is lying. The third concern is that honest people can show similar behavior changes to dishonest ones. Dishonest people's behaviors often change because they are afraid the lie will be discovered. However, honest people can feel fear as well when they think their story is not believed. The physiological responses to both of these fears are almost identical.



The optimal approach to any strategic conversation for executives is one of disciplined listening and truth

verification. Disciplined listening involves being aware of the subtleties involved in communication and their underlying meaning; while truth verification ensures the conversation follows a path that allows a person to feel confident a counterpart has been honest.

The disciplined listening approach begins before the conversation starts as the executive considers what the goal of a conversation is and identifies potential areas of resistance may be encountered. This preparation allows for determining the order of topics and the best questions to lead in to each topic. When the conversation begins, open the dialogue with short, non-threatening topics to determine what the counterpart looks and sounds like when responding truthfully and comfortably.

After establishing the behavioral norm, transition to questions that will support intended interests later in the discussion. One of the more effective questioning techniques is the assumptive question. Assumptive questions typically involve the concept of how or when. As an example, ask, “How long would it take to complete a project?” as opposed to asking, “Can you complete the project in three months?” When an assumptive question is asked, the respondent must employ more cognitive resources to develop an answer, which provides the one asking the question with more potential behavior to evaluate and more observed intelligence to integrate into a strategy.

Understanding the research and learning strategies to identify dishonesty including verbal and nonverbal communication can give business leaders the edge. Using a strategic approach of leading counterparts down a desired path, utilizing effective questioning techniques, interpreting verbal and nonverbal communication and ethically applying persuasive techniques provide business leaders with this desired advantage in any interaction.



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*Mike will be speaking at the upcoming YPO personal development seminar, *Unspoken Truth: Reading Nonverbal Signs of Truth Telling & Deception*, 15-17 October in Las Vegas, Nevada. Members, [learn more](#).*