



The truth about lying

Would I lie to you?

Fib, tell porky pies, be economical with the truth, have somebody on, pull the wool over their eyes... whatever you call it, there's a lot of it about. In fact it's estimated that we all 'lie' to about a third of the people we meet each day. Or if you want an even more surprising statistic, that 93 per cent of us regularly and consciously lie at work. A figure that covers 'whoppers', as well as the little lies we tell each other because it smoothes the way, or we just don't want to upset anyone. And as you probably realise, over the years, face-to-face lying has been joined by a powerful new force: all that faking and dissembling we do via email.

The '419' scam

Have you ever had one of those emails, apparently sent from somewhere in Africa, promising you a share of countless millions of dollars in return for letting someone briefly lodge the funds in your bank account? I'm sure you have. This is called the '419' scam (after the relevant part of the Nigerian criminal code) and relies on you advancing some money to help release the funds. Naturally if you do send money, you never see it again. Now who would be silly enough to part with their hard earned cash? Actually, quite a few people, as the FBI have calculated that this con nets \$200 Million dollars a year. This is interesting because it underlines not only people's gullibility, but the way in which different modes of communication can be used to lie. Naturally there's all sorts of fascinating research in this area, including work that confirms that less deception occurs the 'closer' the communication. So for example in business most lying occurs in emails, then on the telephone, and finally face-to-face.

Trust me

Does it matter? Many would say that a few 'white' lies are what makes the world go round, and surveys show that in about a third of workplaces bosses are comfortable with their employees 'lying' to their customers. Shocked? Let's step back for a moment and consider why people do it. Actually given the figures, lying is starting to look like quite normal behaviour. Not really surprising if you consider things from an evolutionary viewpoint. Surely those who are good at bending the truth get more of

what they want, and so end up with greater resources to play with. However let's not get carried away, lying does matter as it erodes trust. Trust is about having *confidence* in a person or an organisation. And if you cannot rely on someone, and assume they will deceive you, it becomes very difficult to do business. But there is a caveat, 'blind' trust is often as bad as lying as it can lead to collusion, cronyism, and at worst, corruption. So we need to be careful about what we accept as normal. We also need to be able to detect the truth.

Lying behaviour

Walk into a book shop and browse the popular psychology section and you will find lots of books on 'body language'. Often these will include a section on lying and outline a number of ways of spotting a fibber. But it's actually quite hard to spot a seasoned liar. Even the police get it wrong. That's because we look for the wrong signs. Unfortunately, as many books claim, liars do not avoid eye contact, blink at an alarming rate, continually touch their noses, ears or mouths, or act in a generally shifty manner. It's all rather more subtle. And if you think about it, if you're considering lying you probably have all this 'how to spot a liar' folklore in your head, and are *more* likely to try and control your facial features – to adopt a 'poker face' or smile serenely.

Fortunately there are scientific ways of recognising the truth, when you hear it or see it. This can be illustrated by picking just two techniques: the first relies on consistency, the second, congruity.

When you invent a tall tale you make it up in chronological order. You start at 'A' and wander along to 'Z', embellishing your story as you go. That's the way we think: forwards. Now imagine what would happen if I asked you to tell me your story in reverse order (RO). It's much harder and liars make many more speech errors, things like false starts and slips of the tongue, compared to someone who is recounting a genuine story – which will be consistent both backwards and forwards. The RO method is used by the police and has made them better at accurately classifying both truths *and* lies, especially if someone is asked to work through their story from the beginning, followed by a 'can you run that by me again', but this time from the end. It then becomes a question of seeing if the two versions of events meet in the middle!

Heart on your sleeve

It is difficult to disguise your core emotions, and psychologically we respond at an emotional level before anything else. This makes emotions virtually impossible to hide, especially as they tend to 'leak out' through our faces. So next time you talk to someone, and you suspect they are stretching the truth, look for differences between what they are saying and their expression - in particular pay careful attention to any 'micro-expressions' that flash over their face. These only last for about 1/15 of a second so you will need to be quick. However they should always be congruent with what is being said. For example, happy talk should be mirrored by a happy face, and grim news should be accompanied by a suitably grim face. If this isn't happening you're not being told the full story. For a practical demonstration of the strength of

this technique, watch the face of a politician next time you see one being interviewed.

Brain strain

What all this adds up to is that our brain is put under greater strain when we tell lies. It just doesn't work well enough to let us get away with running efficiently through stories backwards and forwards, the load is too great. And the old part of our brain, the bit that governs our emotions, has a habit of giving us away. But then perhaps that's as it should be, because thinking of evolution again, in past times *automatically* signalling whether or not you were to be trusted no doubt avoided a great deal of unnecessary blood shed. It could be that we've got problems now because we've just forgotten how to read the 'trust' signals properly.

Dr Mark Parkinson is a professional Business Psychologist specialising in executive assessment & selection, and the identification of individual talent, entrepreneurial flair and leadership potential.

© 2009 Mark Parkinson