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# Focus

*A Newsletter published for clients and friends of Wagner Consulting Group*

## Dealing with Deceivers

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Human beings are natural born liars. Lying is a deeply rooted behavior, and we use it with abandon. For what it's worth, other animals and plants also send deceptive information because it confers survival advantages to them, as it does for us. Lying – from little white lies to spare someone's feelings to malicious deceit – helps people succeed within our close-knit social systems. Moreover, we are adept at lying to ourselves, which helps us be more convincing when we lie to others.

Dr. David Livingstone Smith, who studies deception and self-deception at the New England Institute, puts it this way:

“Ironically, the primary reasons we are so good at lying to others is that we are good at lying to ourselves. There is a strange asymmetry in how we apportion dishonesty. Although we are often ready to accuse others of deceiving us, we are astonishingly oblivious to our own duplicity. The strange phenomenon of self-deception has perplexed philosophers and psychologists for more than 2,000 years. On the face of it, the idea that a person can con oneself seems as nonsensical as cheating at solitaire or embezzling money from one's own bank account.”

Dr. Smith goes on to say that our own minds are not “transparent to their owners” and that introspection often fails to reveal an “accurate understanding of our mental life.” Since lying is pervasive, it's obvious that identifying lies and successfully dealing with liars has advantages, especially in business.

### Detecting Deceit

Behavioral professionals have worked for decades on identifying clues for spotting deception. Mechanical tools, from polygraphs to sophisticated computers and software, are becoming more accurate, but most of us “normal folks” must rely on our sight and hearing to detect lies. Unfortunately, we're not very good at that. A recent study found that the average person's ability to spot a lie was a 50/50 proposition, but you can improve your ability to recognize mendacity by taking note of the following behavioral clues:

- A delay in answering a question
- More negative words, like hate, and less cooperative behavior
- Withholding information
- Ambivalent answers and repetition of words and phrases
- Avoiding statements of ownership and avoiding taking responsibility

In the end, detecting deception usually comes down to common sense or the subconscious pattern recognition carried out by our brain that we call “gut feel” or “intuition.” Anytime you find yourself saying (or thinking) “Really?” there is a very good chance someone is lying to you. Once our skepticism is aroused, we begin to evaluate more critically communication from others. Besides spoken or written words, interpersonal communication includes facial expressions, tone of voice, tempo of words, and body language.

### **Dealing with Liars**

Handling the occasional or inconsequential lie is a routine part of life, but dealing with a significant lie or a chronic liar presents a more difficult challenge. Maintaining a business relationship, at least until completion of a job, or preserving a good association with a customer, coworker, or other person often requires skillful communication. Whether for the short term or long haul, the following five-step technique is effective in dealing with liars. The goal of this method is to find out the truth without causing unnecessary hostilities.

First, express your reason for doubting a statement. Be clear, be calm, and be specific. Don't come across as though you're attacking the other person.

Let them know up front you will apologize if you're wrong. You want to minimize the personal nature of your skepticism. Be sincere, and position yourself as someone searching for the truth.

Make honesty safe for the other party, and emphasize the lesser consequences of telling the truth, rather than lying.

Tell them the greater consequences of pressing the lie forward, but do not exaggerate.

Finally, ask for the truth. This direct approach, following the previous four steps, can shock the other person into a reassessment of their behavior. It can also be perceived as confrontational and thereby raise the emotional tension of the conversation. Or, with a dedicated liar, you may get no different response than the initial (suspect) answer. Also be mindful that the suspected liar may have fooled himself into believing the lie. If that's the case, you will need to present convincing evidence to counter the liar's assertion or involve other people to help pierce the veil of self-delusion.

In any case, you arrived at this point because the alternatives were unacceptable, so you now have an acceptable response or you move on to “Plan B.”

Finally, I *promise* you this technique always works perfectly in every situation. Really!

*Tom Wagner*



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