

# My lie is okay, yours is not

While some lie for selfish gain, white lies can benefit both the originators and recipients

## Work / Life



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Boss Bob tells you that he did not hire Tom to replace you. He did, but he wants you to believe him.

You ask buddy Harry if he has heard of the new hire Tom. Harry gives you his shoulder a squeeze:

"He's a star, but not as good as you."

It came to you that Tom, when asked if you have been showing him the ropes, told Bob: "Not much", omitting the fact that you spent all of last night going over the sales strategy with him.

Everyone is lying, you think bitterly. But if you decide to declare "no more bluffing" at work in 2022, the advice that experts would give you is: "Don't".

"Selfish black lies" such as Tom's might carry a motive for one's gain at the expense of others, but white lies such as "false praise" can benefit both their originators and recipients, said Professor Boh Wai Fong from Nanyang Technological University.

They even raise trust levels when made with good intent, added Prof Boh. "The finding that deception can increase trust is an interesting one as it challenges the prevailing assumption that deception violates trust."

Hence, should Tom - who knows that he is there to replace you - tell you that he has heard impressive things about you, you might dislike him less. You might even help him more, which will ease the transition and help the company.

Studies have shown some firms

thrive on lies. Some jobs, such as that of negotiators, make bluffing a skill.

Remote call centres, said Prof Boh, citing an example, apply "strategic deception" to deceive their clients. Tactics include the use of local accents, display of a knowledge of local cultural norms, and the use of local pseudonyms, she said. These businesses even hide their locations.

Organisational change consultant and author Ron Carucci, in a Harvard Business Review article in 2019, listed four reasons that lead to lying becoming normalised in companies. His observations were gleaned from 3,200 interviews in 210 organisational assessments in a 15-year study.

One, employees are more likely to lie if companies tout one set of values and mission while employees experience another: "We don't

know who we are any more, so we're just making things up," said an interviewee in the article.

Second, when measurements of performance are seen as being unfair: "It's a rigged system."

Third, there is no effective process for honest conversations: "Truth is forced underground, leaving the organisation to rely on rumours and gossip."

Lastly, when teams operate in silos.

When deception becomes systemic in organisations, it leads to stakeholders trusting the company less. The symptoms - "product recalls, fraud, data breaches and C-suite missteps" - then hurt firms' bottom line, Mr Carucci wrote.

Stories of famous names felled by deception include Enron, Wirecard, Bernard Madoff's Ponzi investment securities firm and,

closer to home, nickel trading firms Envy Global Trading and Envy Asset Management, and the Bellagraph Nova Group.

People tend to lie more in organisations that reward the self over community, and when the content of the lie is less personal, said Prof Boh. "They might lie less when they are in personal settings such as at home or at church."

Men are more likely to lie than women, and more likely to distort the truth to get ahead, studies have shown. On the other hand, women are more likely to tell lies that benefit others, even when it is detrimental to themselves.

In that respect, organisations with better female representation and diversity might achieve higher levels of integrity, Prof Boh said.

In a study on 416 local subjects released last month, Prof Boh and



ILLUSTRATION: CEL GULAPA

co-lead Georgios Christopoulos found that entrepreneurs sense distrust and avoid deception more swiftly than managers and professionals.

They forgive liars more quickly as well. Said Prof Boh: "These are qualities that organisations require in positions that require negotiation, trust-building and a swift ability to recover from a bad situation."

Associate Professor Christopoulos said: "If we assume that lying will happen, then a more important question is what happens after that, especially if the act of lying is revealed."

"A simple apology might actually work, but even if there is some apology, the relationship does not start from where it was before."

Tax consultant Grace So, 25, said: "In my experience, it's mostly the bosses who lie to protect my feelings. I also think it's an attempt to improve themselves based on feedback. The main 'softie' boss in my department used to be very strict and critical, but several colleagues have given him feedback... (It) seems like he may have over-corrected though."

"Niceness" seems to have ended up working against the boss. Ms So said: "I and several colleagues I know tend to prioritise work for other bosses, or not pay so much attention to detail when performing work for him, as we know he would never criticise anything we do."

She tells "small" lies at work to not seem lazy or to be slacking off. "Lying to get ahead in your career is not really bad per se, but certain boundaries should be set, such as making sure your lie isn't at the expense of others," she said.

Grace is a kind woman, you think. But you - you are a brazen, self-serving man. You lay out your plan: Tell Harry to bluff Bob that you are quitting and taking your accounts with you. Tell Tom you concede, you are leaving and he can even have your favourite coffee machine. When Bob confronts you, swear that the thought of quitting never once crossed your mind.

Naturally, Bob will doubt Harry, disbelieve you, and grow alarmed by the time Tom gets to him. Without doubt, he will start to question Tom's judgment and naivety.

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