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## JOURNAL REPORTS: LEADERSHIP

# The Lies We Tell at Work—and the Damage They Do

Lying at our jobs feels so harmless. Honestly, it isn't.

*By Tessa West*

March 27, 2020 10:26 am ET

Most of us believe that everyday interactions are marked by honest conversations. We recognize that people lie, but we don't think they lie to *us*. At work, we reserve our harshest social punishments—humiliation, exclusion and a loss of status—for the tellers of big lies.

Yet despite our moral objections to dishonesty, lying is incredibly common: Most people lie around two to four times a day. And the workplace is no exception. Lying begins at the application stage and ends at the exit interview, with lots of dishonesty in between.

Many of the lies we tell feel harmless. But the consequences are far from it. Dishonesty can kill healthy team dynamics, encourage manipulation and deception, and keep honest people from getting ahead. What's more, the habit of telling lies, even little ones, is contagious. It doesn't take long for a habit to become a norm, and a norm to become a culture.

## Lying to land the job

Lying at work starts before the job even begins—in the application stage. Résumé padding—inflating or simply making up accomplishments—is surprisingly common. One study found that 75% of hiring managers have caught a candidate lying on a résumé, typically about their education or qualifications, despite it being easy to fact check (which only about 50% of companies do). Résumé padders aren't limited by status; entry-level employees and aspiring CEOs alike pad their résumés.

The consequences of résumé padding extend far beyond the risk of discovery. For companies, there's the obvious risk of hiring employees who are ill-equipped for the job. Beyond that, those who were willing to risk their career and their reputation to land the job might also be willing to do so to keep it. And in organizations where lying on a résumé to get ahead becomes standard practice, other unsavory workplace practices are likely to follow.

The solutions are simple: Hiring managers should check résumés more carefully, including dates and education. When checking with references, they should make it clear what they hope to learn. And they should ask all references the same questions to enable clear comparisons across potential employees.

## Lying to get ahead

Once somebody gets inside an organization, the lies only increase—to get a raise, take credit for somebody else’s idea, and cover up mistakes, to name three of the most common.

And the higher people climb in an organization, the more often they lie. One survey found that among 1,000 employees, 37% of managers tell a lie once a week or more (compared with 28% of entry-level employees telling one). Most people feel that the lies they tell to get ahead at work are justified. The same survey found that lying to improve your chances to receive a raise or promotion was seen as “not at all justifiable” by only 32% of women and 23% of men. Lying to avoid being reprimanded was at least somewhat or slightly justifiable, according to 76% of women and 81% of men.

The solution isn’t necessarily to punish those who lie to get ahead, but to reward those who are honest. Shifting from an outcome-based reward structure to a process-based one is one way to remove dirty competitive practices. Leaders can reward team members for supporting one another. Leaders who admit mistakes serve as powerful role models for others who are afraid to come forward. Together, these changes can shift the norms of an organization away from a culture of dishonesty.

## Lying to achieve work-life balance

When it comes to work-life balance, dishonesty cuts two ways. First, people work when they claim to be taking time off. And second, they take time off when they claim to be working.

Both do harm, especially to the people who *don’t* lie.

Let’s consider the first—claiming to take time off when you are actually working. This can happen when companies have paid-time-off policies, such as parental leave, “on paper only.”

High achievers are often unwilling to take advantage of those policies, setting the tone for an entire organization.

As a result, as pressure to work untenable work schedules rises, employees feel that their survival forces them to lie about using policies designed to improve work-life balance. That means working during time off, such as taking business calls during a child’s soccer game or working during paternity leave.

What does this mean for employees? For those who can work during their time off, it means greater productivity. Fewer meetings, more time to get stuff done!

But not everyone is aware of how to misuse these policies, nor do they have the luxury of doing so. Only people with external support systems at home (such as those who can afford nannies) have the option of working during paternity leave. And only people who have big networks, mentors in senior leadership positions and parents who taught them the ins and outs of workplace politics know how to take advantage of such policies.

And what happens to those who are left in the dark, who don't lie? They simply can't compete with those who do.

After two weeks of actually not working while on parental leave, for instance, people may come to be seen by colleagues and bosses as not committed to the job. They often come back from leave to find their job has been given to someone else who "filled in" while they were gone.

In many organizations, these people often belong to groups that aren't well-represented among senior leadership (or the company at all): women in male-dominated professions, first-generation employees whose parents didn't work white-collar jobs, racial and ethnic minorities who don't get the same amount of informal leadership as their white co-workers.

The result is a leaky pipeline with an unknown cause. Senior leaders ask themselves, "Why are talented people leaving when we have great workplace balance policies?"

If employees are to honestly embrace work-life balance policies as they are intended, such policies need to be mandatory, used by everyone equally (including senior leaders), and not easily abused. Flexible policies tend to be the best kind. If good policies are in place and no one is honestly taking advantage of them, organizations need to take a close look to figure out why. There might be perverse incentives to lie about how they are used.

Then there's the second kind of lie, people who claim they are working during actual working hours when they are not. People lie about how many hours they work in a week, on the order of about 5% to 10%. One study found that the higher the number of hours people claimed they work, the bigger the lie—those who claimed to work 75 hours a week usually worked about 50.

The average person spends 1.5 to three hours a day at work on "private activities" (70% of U.S. internet traffic passing through porn sites is done during working hours, and 60% of all online purchases are made during working hours.) People might be telling their bosses they are working hard on that new assignment, but on the average eight-hour workday, there's about a 20% chance they are lying.

Once again, though, it's the people who *don't* lie who are hurt the most. They're the ones who are more likely to be exhausted. When you take “down time” during working hours—taking a nap or working out during a conference call—you are able to get ahead without feeling burned out.

To change this culture of lying, companies need to first take a step back and ask themselves two questions: One, what does it really take to succeed here? (For instance, how many hours a week of work in the office?). And two, do our work-life-balance policies actually align with what it takes to succeed?

In many companies, the behaviors people think they need to engage in to succeed are in direct contradiction with the on-paper work-life-balance policies. The chances are these companies have a dishonesty problem on their hands.

Companies then need to align their policies with what it takes to succeed. If, for example, an organization involves fast-paced decision making in teams, and the reality is, it is simply not possible to take three months completely off and jump right back in without severely disrupting team flow, then it's pointless to have a three-month paid parental leave, no matter how wonderful that looks on paper. Instead, that company might give people the option of taking two days off at work for longer stretches of time, or shorter workdays.

Companies must be honest with themselves about how their policies affect employees' chances, or employees won't be honest users of those policies.

## **Lying with feedback**

Oh, the feedback conversation. We all have to have them, but most of us don't find them particularly useful (only about 26% of employees do). When done well, these conversations can lay the groundwork for improvement. But harsh truths violate social norms, and so people avoid telling them. And a too-nice culture can create problems, because it creates an environment where people who need to improve have no idea how.

Some norms are best changed from the top down, and creating a culture of honest feedback is one of them. Bosses can model the behavior by starting small—asking employees, for example, for feedback on where the next company party should be, or who should cater lunch (trivial things people actually care about).

But for serious issues, bosses need to put a few practices in place to encourage their teams to give honest feedback. Providing anonymity, at least initially, can help build trust. Have employees talk among themselves without the boss in the room, then have one person deliver major themes to the boss without singling out people.

People are less tempted to sugarcoat feedback if it is asked for, and specific. Bosses should encourage their employees to have more agency in the feedback process by coming prepared to feedback meetings with a list of what they want to get feedback on. This type of feedback is easier to give, feels less threatening to receive, and is more useful.

## Lying during the exit interview

Exit interviews are the most common strategy organizations use for identifying problems in the workplace; 91% of Fortune 500 companies and 87% of midsize companies conduct them. But for lots of reasons (fear of retribution, a lack of motivation to care), people simply aren't honest about why they leave. Most bosses think their direct reports quit because they want more money (89%), but most people quit because they feel like their boss doesn't appreciate them.

The irony is, the more terrible the boss, the less likely people are to report them. Ex-bosses have the potential to do a lot of good, but also a lot of damage, to employees who are looking for a new job. The risk to one's reputation is reason enough to lie during an exit interview—especially for lower-level employees who don't have strong networks outside of their current jobs.

The exit interview is the bellwether of workplace dishonesty—if people are lying on their way out, then chances are they have told plenty of self-protective lies all along the way. While there are plenty of ways to fix the exit interview, the real solution has to come a lot sooner than that. Companies should start by improving the feedback process, as noted above. They should create structures for employees to find mentors in senior leadership positions who aren't their bosses. And they should set up networking programs to help employees who feel isolated.

All these things will help people start with honesty and continue on the same path. When people feel comfortable being honest about the problems they face during their jobs, and they have a strong network to buffer them from a potential reputation-thrashing ex-boss, they are more likely to be honest about why they are leaving.

And they are more likely to not want to leave in the first place.

*Dr. West is an associate professor of psychology at New York University. She can be reached at [reports@wsj.com](mailto:reports@wsj.com).*

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*What kind of lying have you seen in the workplace? Is it effective, harmful, or both? Join the conversation below.*

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