To lie or not to lie? (Sep 10)

Peter Clayton returns with another chapter in TrainingZone’s Body language Clinic. This month we talk about lying. How good are you? Hmm. Not sure we believe you.

Telling a convincing lie

We all have to lie from time to time as we go through life. Sometimes to protect ourselves, sometimes to protect others. We even grade them – the fib, white lie, the lie of concealment, the misleading lie and the business lie.

Does the lie have a place in life, or should we all be absolutely honest with each other all the time, about everything? I feel sure we could spend many hours debating the pros and cons of lying including many moral issues.

There are in fact a number of good reasons why we have to lie. To tell the truth might be unnecessarily hurtful. Telling the white lie, when you decide to tell a colleague how good they look when they return to the office having spent a small fortune on clothes or a new hairstyle is probably the right thing to do, as in my experience little can be said for being honest in such a situation. Spoiling someone’s day unnecessarily is difficult to justify. It is also worth bearing in mind that it is just your opinion. Everyone else may disagree with you.

Lying in business is another matter

In business it is a matter of day-to-day necessity to lie or conceal a wide variety of issues. In certain cases to tell the truth might even be illegal. For example, when one company is having secret talks to purchase another, the stock market price of their shares could be affected if they told other people in advance of the acquisition. If asked a direct question relating to a potential acquisition and they had answered it honestly, they may have given someone the opportunity to purchase stocks in advance and make money from the information, thus breaking the law with regard to insider trading.

Why are some people so bad at lying?

In deciding to lie to someone, we try to convince them of the accuracy of the information by reinforcing the statements with body language signals.

Look me in the eye

One of the most obvious mistakes is deliberately looking someone straight in the eye when lying. The origins of this emanate from the challenging statement we heard as children “look me in the eye and tell me that you know nothing about what happened.” This might be accurate
with children, teenagers and young adults as they do tend to look down or away when concealing the truth. In order to counteract this they are advised to look people in the eye to prove the truth of their words.

As we get older we believe that looking people in the eye when lying will help us look more convincing. We compound the mistake by staring without blinking and adopting a solid posture whilst the statement is being said.

Even though they are not sure why, it tends to give the game away to the majority of people because instinct tells us that something is wrong and we become suspicious about what we are hearing. We don't know what it is, but we just know it feels wrong.

**Constricting pupils**

There is also the issue of the eyes. You may be the best liar in the world, but you cannot prevent your eyes constricting when you lie. A good negotiator will always make best use of the light, so he can see your eyes but you can't see his!

**A few things to bear in mind**

1. Don't look directly into the pupils of the person you're lying to, look at the whole face
2. Maintain eye contact for 75% of the time (the average for most people)
3. Be aware that the voice usually goes flat when you are lying. In trying to lie convincingly we control pitch and resonance, believing it will sound more convincing. Often, each word is clipped in an attempt to be precise. Changes in the voice coupled with a look directly into the eyes will cause doubt. “I don't know what it is but……”
4. Next is body posture, whether standing or sitting

In an effort to conceal the truth when a lie is being told the body generally becomes more solid or rigid. This is made more difficult because only you know what your body language is like when you tell the truth and you must make sure you don't change it when lying. If you are an animated person who looks at people 75% of the time, then don't alter your habits, do not increase the eye stare, or reduce body movement or sound firmer with your words. People will not always be sure you are lying, but they can tell something has changed. Another difficult area to control when lying is the hands. Some people fidget with their hands and arms (especially when caught off guard with a question they did not expect.) One second the hands are in pockets and then out and this may get repeated several times.

**Blushing and nose blushing**

The skin gets warmer when someone is feeling awkward. This is because blood vessels in and around the nose and face are irritated when you exaggerate or lie. The only way to make the irritation to go away is to rub or lightly touch the tingling and offending areas of the face. We have carried out a number of body language experiments in this area and discovered that 90% of those observing hand-to-face contact thought that something was wrong and they became cautious of what was being said. To anyone who understands body language it is a giveaway. Therefore if you cannot learn to leave the offending areas alone, stick to telling the truth.
Who are the best liars?

Politicians have to be good at lying because journalists will never stop asking awkward questions that will give them tomorrow’s headline. Unlike many of us, the MP has learnt to adapt. By giving a much longer answer and explanation than necessary, the MP telling the lie avoids being asked a follow up question and hopes the reporter has either forgotten his original question or gives up.

One of the contracts I have is to analyse public figures and I sometimes have to spend weeks or months studying before I can be sure of a politician’s gestures that tell that an MP is concealing the truth.

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