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### The importance of being dishonest at work



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Most people like to think that they're fundamentally honest, but in the office, you don't have to look too hard to find liars, damn liars, and coworkers. People in the workplace will lie about anything and everything—from why they were late for work, what they watched on television last night, and how their important projects are progressing. In some extreme cases, prevarications can lead to the downfall of a career, but in most cases, I cannot tell a lie: In the workplace, there are many benefits to being dishonest and lies are just a good way to get through the workday without a lot of hassle.

#### **To lie or not to lie in the workplace?**

Telling the truth may help you sleep better at night, but a carefully crafted lie in the workplace has certain benefits.

**The need for water cooler material.** A lot of office networking and bonding is done in a company's break room and at the water cooler. These light conversations can help get your mind off of work for a few minutes and they often involve pop culture. But what if you didn't see last night's episode of Jay Leno or don't keep up with the latest reality shows?

This is where the need to listen, and lie, comes in. If you get the gist of what people are talking about, even just enough to say "Yeah, I thought last night's episode of 'Law & Order' was great," you can connect with them. Although it doesn't mean much when you're scarfing down your lunch, people who have common interests with you will remember you and this can give you political clout later on.

**The need to get along with colleagues.** Although you may be itching to disagree with some of the things that your coworkers say, sometimes it's best to lie in order to keep the peace.

"Lie when it promotes a better work environment," said Ward Anderson, author of *The Ultimate Bachelor's Guide*. "If the boss is a screaming conservative, it's probably best not to disagree with him when he shouts how global warming is a crock. You might not have to lie outright, but a simple nod of the head and an 'I hear ya' can save you a lot of hassle in the long run."

**Keeping your private life private.** In order to pass the time during the workday, your colleagues may want to discuss what they do in their private lives—and they expect you to do the same. If you don't give them at least a little bit of information, you run the risk of being seen as aloof and difficult, so if you really want to keep your business to yourself, make something up.

"It's okay to lie about what you do outside of work because, quite frankly, it's no one's business but your own, so long as your extracurricular activities don't interfere with your work performance," said Niki Payne, certified True Colors facilitator and Project Manager at True Colors International. "There is no reason to risk your reputation at the expense of individual interests that may or may not be shared by others in the workplace."

**Cultivating business relationships.** Sometimes in the workplace, matters of taste are worth lying over and those lies can advance your career. Ultimately, it's the manager's opinion that matters, so in some cases, just swallowing your pride and being agreeable can pay off.

"People told Walt Disney that 'Bambi' was a good name for a male deer that is seen as King of the Forest. Fifty years later, it's the name of every third stripper you meet in Vegas. But the boss wanted Bambi and so people went with Bambi," said Anderson. "Somewhere out there, a starving animator is out of work because he argued to Disney that the deer should be called 'Butch'. Everyone that lied got to work on 'Cinderella'."

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### **The consequences of lies in the workplace**

In the workplace, there may be many good reasons to lie. But not so fast, [Pinocchio](#): Lying at work is not always the best way to communicate with colleagues.

"Lying only feels like a benefit because it reduces the immediate distress of the person doing the lying. However, for most people, the anxiety related to maintaining the lie ultimately outweighs the immediate emotional relief," said Christopher Bauer of [Bauer Ethics Seminars](#). "Besides, as our [grandmothers](#) told us, it takes far too much work to remember the lies we tell, which of course we need to do in order to maintain them. All of that distress can be avoided by simply being honest in the first place."

### **Consequences of workplace lies**

**The effects of lies on businesses.** Lying may have short-term benefits, such as getting new [customers](#) for your business, but the long-term effects may not be worth it. Bad news travels fast, and certain lies can ruin your company's reputation.

"Integrity is highly valued in the workplace, especially when it comes to sales and service. When a single individual misrepresents a company, it reflects poorly on the company as a whole," said Payne. "One negative experience is more likely to spread to others than a positive one, thereby tarnishing the image and reputation of a company in the eyes of the general public."

In addition to loss of reputation, constant lying in the office can decrease [morale](#) by creating an environment of distrust. If employees get away with some white lies, said Bauer, they will easily be tempted to tell big lies.

"If lying in any form is condoned on the job, how can you rationally draw the line about which kinds of lies are okay? Is it okay to lie about what you've accomplished that day, but not to fudge on your time sheet or expense report? Is it okay to lie about how you feel about a coworker, but not about your supervisees' performance on their job review? These distinctions may seem easy in theory but, in the real world, they can get extremely blurry in a [culture](#) where it is known that lying in any form is okay," he said.

**Personal repercussions.** Lies can give and the discovery of lies can take away. Oftentimes, employees will be stripped of the benefits they gained by lying—such as promotions and praise—if they are caught telling important lies about their work or about their coworkers.

Also, being fake all of the time can take its toll on people [emotionally](#). Of course, we must all put on different faces in our professional and personal lives, but creating a total persona that is different from your true personality can be draining and [lonely](#)—especially if your focus has only been a corporate ladder climb.

"Lying to your coworkers in order to gain leverage in the workplace can often hinder any true [friendships](#) you might've forged along the way," said Anderson. "While you were busy getting ahead, you might've cut yourself off from the people who you would've truly been able to share your real thoughts and opinions with—simply because you lied to others in order to get ahead."

*This article originally appeared on my [Workplace Communication Examiner](#) page in October 2009.*

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