

In-Depth Look at Dishonesty

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In today's world, dishonesty, behaving inappropriately, and other types of unethical behaviors are commonplace, whether in the business world, government, sports, schools, or any other arena. Although the media tends to concentrate on extreme cases of dishonest behavior, such as Madoff's Ponzi scheme, rarely does anyone look at what researchers refer to as "ordinary unethical behavior." Examples include copying someone's test answers, stealing from an employer, exaggerating the amount of charitable contributions when filing taxes, or purchasing an amazing outfit to wear once and return the next day. This type of unethical behavior is usually the result of your average, everyday person giving into the impulse to act dishonestly when the chance arises.

When dishonest behaviors occur, the cost can be incredibly high for businesses, as well as society as a whole. The following looks at a few of the major areas of research into the nature and potential causes of everyday dishonesty.

Examine the situations you tend to place your employees into. Research indicates that people's moral compasses are pliable and can be easily influenced by a variety of factors. While the level of personal integrity does vary from one person to another, anyone is prone to environmental factors. The truth is that most people react dishonestly when placed in certain situations. This is why it is not so much about changing the person, as it is changing the circumstances.

Walk the talk. The simple act of leaders "walking the talk" in their organization can have a significant impact on followers' decisions to cross ethical boundaries. In addition, unethical behavior can easily spread, thanks to peer influence. Creating an honest culture that focuses on appropriate conduct over harsher rules can decrease ethical failures.

Take both formal and informal cultures and structures into account. In any organization, informal cultures, such as office norms, and formal structures, such as reporting, influence conduct. Never make the mistake of concentrating

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Become outcome oriented. Measuring outcomes is a crucial component of any organization. However, this doesn't mean you should allow outcome to result in "goals gone crazy." Instead of focusing on an employee's gifts, outcomes, and abilities, foster a growth mindset by concentrating on efforts, learning and improvements. Growth mindset will not reduce dishonesty, but also improve performance.

Is everyone dishonest or is it just a habitual trait? Studies have found, on numerous occasions, that although not everyone will behave dishonestly when the chance presents itself, under certain circumstances, most people will do so. For example, in a typical lab study examining dishonesty (specifically cheating), participants were asked to perform a task, such as complete a math test in 15 minutes or roll a die, and then self-report the results. The higher the self-reported performance, the higher the amount of compensation participants received. The results showed that people did tend to inflate their performance to earn a higher amount of compensation, but only to a certain extent over their actual performance and considerably lower than the maximum compensation amount.

How do people justify dishonesty? It is common for people not to behave dishonestly as much as they can get away. Instead, they do so up to a point where they can continue to see themselves as a good person. Social psychology research conducted over several decades has determined that people attempt to maintain a positive self-concept, both internally and in the public eye. Additionally, people tend to value honesty and strongly believe in their own morality. This is why when the chance to behave dishonestly presents itself, people tend to feel conflicted between their desire to retain their positive self-concept by behaving honestly and the temptation to improve their self-interest (for example, a financial gain) by overstepping ethical boundaries. A common way they work past this conflict is by only being dishonest to a point, while reinterpreting their bad behavior as honest. It is very common for people to behave dishonestly just enough that they do see a profit from their unethical behavior, while minimizing the extent of their dishonesty.

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Why do we allow ourselves get away with dishonesty that we would condemn others for? It's simple. As humans, we have the tendency to be "moral hypocrites," judging bad behaviors in others but not ourselves. In most cases, this disconnect is not a conscious decision, but the result of "ordinary" psychological processes. The term used to describe the automatic and unconscious processes that impact our ethical decision making that allows us to see ourselves as ethical despite behaving in a manner we would deem unethical in someone else is referred to as "bounded ethicality."

What factors increase dishonesty? Research has determined that a number of factors are at fault, including decreased self-control (the ability to override impulses to ensure our actions are in alignment with standards and goals), ambiguity, creativity (our own, as well as that triggered by a job or situation one is in), the use of stretch goals for anonymity, competition, performance, and loss framing, finding room to justify one's own behavior, and a fixed mindset in which our abilities aren't malleable.

What reduces dishonesty? Research has examined a variety of factors that can effectively decrease dishonesty. They include being monitored (or at the very least, believing we are being monitored), pledging before the event (such as signing an honor code), and other interventions that put our sense of self-salience in jeopardy, such as using the noun liar, instead of the verb lying of evoking memories from childhood. For example, a field experiment conducted with a car insurance company, Shut et al. (2012) found that increasing self-saliency by signing an insurance form at the top as opposed to the bottom increased honesty. These studies indicate that when a person is reminded of their sense of worth (including their desire to be moral) or moral standards, they are less likely to behave dishonestly.

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What factors have been determined to influence dishonesty in college students? A substantial amount of research, most of which is summarized in McCabe, Butterfield, & Trevino (2012): *Cheating in College: Why Students Do It and What Educators Can Do About It*, has been done on this topic. It is shown that students with a lower grade point average, along with those involved in fraternities, sororities, and athletics, tend to be more dishonest. This indicates that social context is a factor. For example, fraternities, sororities, and athletic teams may create an environment in which dishonesty is misinterpreted as helping a brother, sister, or teammate. Additionally, a student's perception of peer behaviors and attitudes can be a factor. If students believe that dishonesty is running rampant on campus, they are more likely to participate. This is why creating a culture of integrity is crucial for institutions trying to keep dishonest behavior down. Honor codes have been studied extensively and have been shown to be effective when implemented strictly and consistently over time. To create this environment, students should recognize the institution's honor code to be accepted and understood by both faculty and staff. In addition, it is critical that they see those who behave dishonestly be punished.

Do people turn to norms more so than rules in regards to ethics? When someone is faced with the decision of being dishonest or not, they tend to look to those around them to gain insight into whether or not this is an appropriate behavior. Lab experiments have found that people who see others similar to them, such as their peers, behaving unethically, they are more likely to engage in unethical behaviors. On a side note, the exemplary behavior of others does impact their chances of behaving honestly, though it is less influential when compared to others' unethical behavior.

As a result, it is crucial for us to have an understanding of how people work when it comes to dishonest behavior in order to prepare and guard ourselves, while also trying to prevent the situation from occurring.