



Regarding Cherry Trees

There are times in our lives when we are faced with the feeling that someone we are dealing with just simply isn't being honest. What's even worse is to discover that our instincts were correct. When this happens, we feel conned, upset, hurt, and sometimes just plain stupid. However, when this occurs in an organization or company, it is no longer simply personal, but a much larger issue that can upset the very livelihoods of many people.

Total honesty in the work place, while prized and valued as an ideal, is often unattainable. Let's face it, some degree of dishonesty is not only common in the workplace but in many cases culturally condoned or even encouraged. Neither the managers nor the employees in most organizations feel completely comfortable with complete (read brutal) honesty within the work place.

Before you jump out of your seat when you read the blasphemous comment above, consider this scenario: two coworkers engage in a small talk at the water cooler for a few minutes ... they are being paid by their employer for the time, so technically, this could be considered "time theft"; that being said, very few people would actually consider this little friendly exchange as even approaching dishonesty. Now consider another: Jerry from the IT department asks out Sandra from accounting. Sandra, in all honesty, feels that she is totally out of Jerry's league, but instead of devastating him with the brutally honest answer, she declines politely and tells him she is seeing somebody.

A culture of accepted "work-diplomacy" has developed and is the common response to many work situations. The telling of little white lies or being "diplomatic" often paves the way to smoother and more palatable work conditions, and it is a compromise that most of us, employees, managers and employers, have come to accept.

The most common reason for "situational" dishonesty from an employee is likely fear. An employee may worry that s/he may be held accountable for something beyond her/his control and in turn lose her/his livelihood. Or the employee may fear that someone who is better liked will get the promotion she/he is after, regardless of that person's performance. Or simply that she/he will not be respected and supported in his/her job. We've all heard of cases where someone claims to have been reprimanded simply for speaking his/her mind, or passed over after years of faithful service in favor of a new hire who is more skilled at - or has a stronger stomach for - office politics. In some cases, this may be nothing more than sour grapes on the part of a disgruntled

employee. In others, it may be an accurate assessment. Unfortunately, perception is often reality, particularly in large companies where personal relationships are often not forged. The image that one projects is frequently more relevant than that person's actual character.

In addition to these concerns, many feel it doesn't always pay for an employee to be honest and say what s/he thinks. If you disagree with the general direction of a project (for example), and voice your opinion, you might be labeled as argumentative or not a team-player - a losing position either way. If the project succeeds despite your objections, then you can be pinned as someone who doesn't know what is going on. If the project fails, you may get part of the blame because the lack of commitment and negativity caused the project to fail. Regardless of the outcome of the project, the employee comes to regret having spoken up. While this may strike some as an extreme reaction, it happens in companies that are not receptive to feedback or do not make their appreciation of said feedback known.

In the same vein, some employers may not be perfectly honest with their employees - for a variety of reasons. Of course, there are cases of the Enron caliber that transpire outright dishonesty. But there are other situations where the grounds for having a hidden agenda are palatable, sometimes even noble. A key employee's departure from the company, for example, may not be announced until a suitable replacement is found, the reason being concerns about the morale of the remaining staff. Glum news about declining sales may be shared only with selected stakeholders while a new strategy is being incubated. In employee evaluations, a diplomatic spin may be put on unfavorable feedback. Job rotations may be presented as a way to keep employees engaged and challenged, while the most important reason for the practice is to make sure that all essential employees are replaceable.

All of the above situations describe common examples where a certain degree of dishonesty is expected and we have accepted this within our working culture on the whole. While seemingly prudent at the time, if these politic situations are excessive and go unchecked, it can stall your company's progress and make the environment miserable, which leads to further and more extreme abuses detrimental to the health and success of the group. These include, but are not limited to: political back-stabbing, posturing, passing the buck, waffling, petty and even large scale theft. All of these are not uncommon occurrences within organizations, and can sap the life out of thriving companies. Loyalty, like honesty, under these circumstances becomes an unattainable ideal, both for the employer and the employee.

How does a company protect itself against disruptive dishonesty that goes beyond mere diplomatic or politically correct behavior? How can a company know whether a new employee or manager is going to work to the best of their abilities, not rock the boat in an adverse way that disrupts the energy and enthusiasm of others, or even more blatantly, steal from the company? It's a tough call. Furthermore, it is becoming harder and harder to differentiate between someone who is just good at saying what others wish to hear (in the sense of slightly twisting the reality to put their best foot forward) and/or someone who will actually cheat, defraud or engage in other deplorable behaviors. It is becoming more and more critical to be able to spot individuals who are

potential energy and resource drains, and who are unwilling to contribute in a meaningful way, leaving behind them a trail of unhappy coworkers, increased distrust and confusion and sometimes lawsuits.

One place companies can start to screen for this trait is during the hiring process. Here are some basic steps that can be taken to reduce the chances that you hire dishonest employees:

1. Do a fact check on the information provided.
2. Don't just call the references (references will usually provide positive feedback on the prospective employee) ... call the companies listed and ask to speak to an HR representative to confirm hiring dates and other facts. If the employee is no longer with the organization or has given permission, ask to speak to someone to whom that employee may have reported but is not a reference. Bear in mind that opinions of an employee may not always be positive (especially if that employee has left or is looking to leave). Rather than soliciting opinions on the employee's character, verify that the statements reported on their résumé are factually correct.
3. Do a background and credit check. Background checks are especially important if the person is to work with cash, deal with confidential or classified info, or be in a position of power. Bad credit may be a red flag for someone who could be tempted to steal.
4. Make use of analytical tools that can test a person's honesty (such as Psychtests' Honesty Test). Bear in mind that the results of any honesty test should never be the only factor determining who is and who isn't hired. They are not infallible and should be interpreted cautiously.

And for the employees and managers who are already part of your team:

1. Stay on top of your corporate or organizational culture. Be aware!
2. Don't let bad employees or managers spoil the whole group; act immediately to discipline or remove disruptively dishonest individuals and make it clear that your organization values and rewards loyalty and honesty.
3. Be as straightforward with your employees as you can, and foster a community spirit. Community and loyalty will go a long way towards dispelling the "fear" response which can encourage employees to become increasingly mum, secretive or dishonest over time.
4. Information and transparency are the best rumor-fighting techniques. Keep employees up to date. Justify unpopular decisions – stay away from the "I-can-do-whatever-I-want-'cause-I'm-the-boss" attitude.
5. Treat your employees with respect and dignity.
6. Establish and communicate clear and reasonable policies. Be fair but flexible in enforcing them. And be fair, period. When employees feel they are not treated fairly, they are more likely to "level the playing field" by stealing or cheating.
7. Be trusting of your employees, but not blindly so. Pay attention to the actions of employees who continually appear disgruntled and create problems with others.
8. Have your current employees take scientifically validated personality tests, to help identify those who may be a problem.

By implementing just a few of the above practices, you can increase the likelihood that your employees will willingly demonstrate greater trustworthiness overall.

Honestly!

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