

# The art of deceit

I cannot count how often I hear the words *appropriate* and *inappropriate*!

If inappropriate is interpreted as anything that might offend others, then I guess it would be safe to say that anything extreme, strongly worded, risqué, contentious, ambiguous, etc. would be included. Hopefully it is not too much of a quantum leap to infer then that *appropriate* and *safe* have become almost synonymous. Does this not fly in the face of nature? While we know that life cannot exist without death, day without night, good without evil, like without dislike, etc., is it realistic to persist with the illusion of a world painted solely in positive hues?

Semantics aside, I would suggest that the unthinking pursuit of appropriateness creates a breeding ground for arch deceit. The more we strive to appear appropriate, how much more likely will we hide what we really feel from others? What impact does only showing an appropriate face have on team, peer and client relationships?

It is a given that most of us are reluctant to express disagreement upfront and are fearful of appearing uncertain, negative or judgemental. We sit at countless meetings with deadpan faces that reveal nothing of what lies within. Or we smile and nod assent, or even gush with false enthusiasm, while we bide our time and find safe, backdoor avenues of expression. Usually invoking process, regulations or laws will provide effective cover.

It seems appallingly normal to sneak behind peoples' backs to make our feelings known. We live in a society that not only condones, but encourages snitching. Call the "snitch" line.

Similarly, feigning understanding at meetings, briefings, instructional encounters, etc. is commonplace. Oftentimes, to save face later, we pick apart process, competence and personality as defective or unsuitable.

Those who disguise unpleasant messages seem to be considered diplomatic and tactful. Those that do not are considered blunt and confrontational. Those

who openly disagree are all too often labelled negative.

Our language is couched in terms that does little to convey what we really mean—much like *American Idol's* Paula Abdul, who unctuously prattles away mouthing sweet nothings in a desperate attempt to let someone know they sang like a goat. Canadian market research showed some years ago that *Idol's* biggest draw card was Simon Cowell—maybe because we vicariously enjoy his refreshing honesty. Ironically, regularly telling people straight up when they sing like hell has made his opinion the most prized and trusted.

While trust is a commonly used business term, perhaps we have lost the real essence of the word. If we deem it improper to honestly express ourselves, how will we ever be trusted? How will we be able to trust people if we have not encouraged them to reveal who they really are and what they feel at any point in time? Consider the costly havoc this phenomenon wreaks with corporate hiring efficiencies. Yet, we continue to encourage and train job candidates to present what is required or expected, not what is real.

The following is a simple checklist to guide decision-making when next tempted to paper-over the right to express ourselves openly and sincerely:

- Would I prefer an honest response if I was in the other person's shoes?
- What response would enable me to get my job done effectively?
- If I am not upfront here, what opportunity will I have lost?
- If I don't speak now, am I prepared to let the matter rest?
- Would my lack of sincerity cost the company money?
- Will I lose trust if I am less than honest?
- Do I want people to know/like me for who I am?
- I am human and therefore imperfect—surely it is okay to show that I have not understood, disagree, etc.



- Have I been invited to express myself honestly, why do I not take advantage of this offer?
- Will my self-esteem be enhanced if I am able to say what I really honestly believe?
- If I keep quiet now, will I habitually resort to insincere/safer ways of expressing myself?

While deceitful people are generally more comfortable to have around in the short term, our awareness that insincerity destroys trust should goad us into encouraging open and upfront interaction. The ensuing trusted relationships will be worth the initial discomfort.

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