

Cheating: The Act of Purposeful Lying

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At the time of writing this essay, the following news item was prominently repeated in numerous media outlets:

“Fraudulent claims of college degrees, a non-existent real estate portfolio and confusion over whether he's Jewish - or merely "Jew-ish" - are just some of the controversies New York Republican congressman-elect George Santos is facing just days before he's due to be sworn in on 3 January.

Before winning his race in the November midterm election, the 34-year-old billed himself as "the full embodiment of the American dream": An openly gay child of Brazilian immigrants who rose to the upper echelons of Wall Street before entering the world of politics.

His victory lap, however, has been short-lived.

Mr Santos's narrative of his life has fallen into tatters, with the embattled soon-to-be representative admitting that large portions of it were entirely made up.

He now faces calls to resign amid federal and local investigations, and as new allegations of lies emerge on a nearly daily basis, with less than a week to go before he's due to begin his duties on Capitol Hill”.

Who is George Santos and why is he in trouble? - BBC News

While the investigation into Mr. Santos is still unfolding, he has already admitted to numerous falsehoods (also known as blatant lies). Some of these seeming falsehoods are so obvious, it is hard to imagine how anyone – particularly in a position of public office – would ever think they could get away with this kind of lying. Clearly these falsehoods worked for enough time for him to be elected to public office – thousands of people believed him and voted for him.

This clearly is a powerful and disturbing example of lying. Furthermore, it was lying with a purpose—in this case offering a portrait of himself that would enable Mr. Santos to get elected to the U.S. Congress. We wish to assign a word to this act of purposeful lying. We are calling it *Cheating*.

The Prevalence and Nature of Cheating

Mr. Santos is not the only cheater in the world. There is a big market for cheating in our mid-21st Century world. Frankly, we have all done some cheating in our life. It might have been nothing more than fudging a bit when reporting expenses on our income tax forms. Perhaps, we were lying a bit and were not totally honest when asked by a colleague to judge their performance during a workshop we

were conducting together. We might even have oversold our services a smidge. We might have estimated a bit high on our anticipated revenues when completing a business plan for submission to our local bank for startup capital. Our meeting with a former girlfriend or boyfriend might not have been reported to our spouse. These are what we identify as *Soft Cheats*—accompanied by *Soft Lies*.

There are of course the *Hard Cheats* and the *Hard Lies*. These take place when we lie about our expenses in filling out a tax form. They are to be found in the affairs some men and women have had outside their committed relationships. We find hard cheats in the bribes that are associated with seeking to influence the formal judgments made about an ice skating or diving performance. The hard cheat is quite a different matter from the soft cheat. Soft lies may be common and even excusable. Hard lies are another matter. They challenge our very notion of ethics and social morality.

When talking about writing this article with several of our coaching colleagues, there is often a very quick and often emotional reaction: DO NOT coach someone who we know has cheated and CEASE to coach someone when we find out that they have been cheating in a big way [hard cheat]!” We wonder if this is the only viable (and ethical) outcome of a potential or ongoing coaching relationship when cheating is discovered or revealed. Is there a role to be played by a skilled and experienced professional coach in this quite challenging setting? In this essay, we have devoted some attention to describing the dynamics of cheating and turn to ways in which one might work with a cheater as a coach (or therapist or counsellor).

What Comprises Cheating?

We propose that all cheating involves three components. First, there must be some purposeful lying. The truth is not being told—and it is not being told for some specific reason. We tell our spouse that we are going shopping when in fact we are meeting with our former boyfriend or girlfriend. The purpose? We don’t want to hurt our spouses’ feelings or we don’t want our spouse to insist that we quit seeing our former boyfriend or girlfriend. Many of our reported expenses actually were for personal travel and some books we purchased for leisure reading. The reason we are lying is that we don’t want to pay more than necessary in taxes.

There is an important observation to make about purposeful lying. We often find that one lie leads to a second and third lie. We need to lie about not lying. Our fabricated shopping trip requires that we lie about what we bought or lie about not finding what we were looking for. Lying is contagious. A lie rarely exists in isolation. The purpose of the second and third lie is to cover up for the first lie. Purposeful lying can be quite contagious!

Second, there must be some violation of formal norms (laws, regulations) or informal norms (courtesy, etiquette, codes of civility). Our marriage vows or shared commitments regarding monogamy were being violated. The laws regarding the reporting of business expenses on a Schedule C form were not being respected. When cheating, we have become “outlaws.” The crime can be domestic in nature, or it can be public. In any case, we are violators and are in some sense renegades who are “running away from the law [social norm]!” Our purpose, in other words, is counter to a broader purpose—namely the need for social order, moral conduct and a sense of personal responsibility.

Third, there is actual harm or potential harm being done to someone or something. The reason why we are cheating (our purpose) is assigned higher priority than the harm to be done. Cheating is never “harmless” – at least not from a broad perspective. Even though the person with whom we are living an intimate life may never find out about our “secret” date (or affair), the nature of our relationship with this person with whom we have made a “commitment” will never quite be the same. It will lose some of its depth and this does harm to the person we “love.” Ultimately, our government is “harmed” when we deny them access to revenue that they “deserve.” While we are only one taxpayer and the lost revenue is miniscule (when compared to the entire national budget), it all adds up and citizens of our nation are “harmed” when they cannot receive critical social services because of a deficit budget.

The Structure of Cheating

When defining the nature and scope of cheating, we can specifically focus on four dimensions. These are size, frequency, type and cost. All four make a big difference when addressing ways in which to confront this challenging behavior.

How Big a Cheat

We have already distinguished between soft and hard cheats but can move beyond this general judgment by engaging our three criteria.

How Big a Lie: The first criterion concerns the violation of truth. The question aligned with this first criterion is: How big a lie has been told or how many associated lies have been conveyed? The size of the lie and number of lies being told are relative. Within a family, it doesn’t take a very big lie or many related lies to be considered a big cheat, whereas in a corporate setting, the lie may need to be a “whopper” and a whole cluster of lies must be engaged for it to be considered “big” as a cheat.

One sexual affair can have a profound impact on a family, whereas it appears that one affair in a corporation usually doesn’t even ripple the water. A corporate tax report is complicated and is subject to many modifications that can impact on the corporation’s reporting of income. Given its complicated nature, the corporate tax report might contain many more “minor” falsehoods that would be “major” if contained on a personal tax return.

It is particularly important to consider the “contagion” factor. How many associated lies are being told. The corporate tax return might not only be complicated—it might also be complex (meaning that many components of the tax report are interdependent) (Miller and Page, 2007). Thus, an overestimation of overseas travel expenses might have to be accompanied by a false report regarding the amount of overseas sales that is contained in a report to stakeholders (stockholders, financial institutions, potential investors, etc.)

Similarly, it is rare that an affair is a one-time event--and it is rare that an affair occurs without some accompanying lies about time away from home, expenses for which there is not easy accounting, and a shift in the frequency and intensity of intimate relations with the partner back home. Lies can indeed be contagious and the extent of their spread is critical.

How Great a Violation: The second way to assess the size of any cheat is turn to the second criterion and ask: to How much violation has taken place? To what extent is the purpose of our lying alienating any sense of personal or civic responsibility? Some cheating is more egregious than other cheating. This assessment of violation is often culture dependent. Adultery (Intimate relationships with someone outside a formal, committed relationship such as marriage) is often common and readily accepted in some societies. Men from the middle and upper class, in particular, might be expected to have a sexual partner on the side, or to have frequent sexual engagements outside their committed relationship. By contrast, in other societies adultery is punishable by even death (often by stoning) – especially if a woman is the perpetrator. Gender does play a major role in determining the nature and extent of violation in many societies.

The matter of violation in the filing of tax reports and in other financial engagements is determined not so much by cultural norms as by political perspectives. Political parties in some countries tend to look the other way or even open the door for underreporting of revenues and for bribery of public officials. Doing “business” in many countries requires the movement of money “under the table” and the exchange of other favors (such as appointment to public office).

Cheating might be punishable by death in a domestic (family) setting, but not in the operation of a family-owned factory or trucking company. Thus, it is important when assessing the extent of cheating to view it withing the context of the norms and values of the setting in which the cheating occurred. Hard Cheating in some settings might be judged Soft Cheating in other settings. This might be an important point for professional coaches to keep in mind when working with a client who has cheated. Cross-cultural reflections might yield critical insights for the client.

How Much Harm: The third criterion is often the most important. It is most likely to be dissonant with regard to the purpose of our lying and attendant behavior. This dissonance can, in turn, either lead to reform in one’s behavior or to establishing a set of beliefs that justify the lying and underlying purpose. We will have much more to say about this matter of dissonance later in this essay.

Ultimately, the fundamental question is: How big is the potential or actual harm? And who is being harmed? We can set aside norms and standards of behavior and even ignore the size and scope of the cheating. The factor that we can’t ignore is the harm being done. How then do we assess the extent of harm that is produced by the cheating behavior? We can, of course, see if there is any direct physical harm. This is usually not the case. Psychological harm and indirect and delayed physical harm (caused by recurrent stress) are much more likely to result from cheating. Furthermore, this harm might be self-inflicted. The cheater is often the first and most immediate recipient of the psychological harm (as we shall explore later in this essay).

Obviously, the harm is often very close-to-home when domestic cheating occurs (such as adultery) and is often wide-spread and delayed when cheating occurs in an organizational setting. In many cases, it is easier to assess “harm” in an organizational setting if it involves finances then if it involves employee morale or working relationships between departments. Extent of physical illness (as reflected in absenteeism and use of medical services) and levels of productivity are also rather easy to measure as ways of assessing “harm.” The psychological harm, however, might be of greatest importance, especially if a professional coach is contracted to provide humane services (“reduce harm”) as well as help improve the financial bottom line of their client’s organization.

How Frequently the Cheating and Lying

The assessment of frequency might on the surface seem to be easier than is the assessment of size regarding cheating and purposeful lying. It would seem to be straight-forward to determine if the cheating occurred just once or if it has occurred repeatedly. Similarly, we should be able to easily calculate the frequency with which a lie has been told. Furthermore, we can ask: is the purpose limited in scope to one situation or one setting, or does it extend to many situations and many settings?

If the cheating and purposeful lying occurs just once, then we might want to focus on the exceptional circumstances that led to the cheating—as well as spend time reflecting on the purpose that led to and guided the cheating. If the cheating and purposeful lying has occurred frequently, then we might want to focus on the broader systemic dynamics operating in the domestic setting or in the organization. We are likely to discover that the underlying purpose is quite broad in scope. It applies to everything and everyone! Are some settings “toxic” with regard to cheating? Do certain people get “sucked into” the role of cheater? Is everyone cheating and is this the only road to success in this organization or to domestic tranquility in this family?

Once or Frequent: As we get further into the assessment of frequency, we find that it is much more elusive than seems initially to be the case. Is the cheating engaged in a systematic manner or in a cyclical manner. Is the purpose of the lying embedded in some broader context or does the purpose reemerge at a particular time or in a particular place? Does the sexual cheating only occur when he goes to his annual sales conference? Do the sales figures only get altered when the quarterly performance review takes place. Is the cheating “habitual” when done by a wife, husband or teenage son or daughter—or when done by the CEO or Financial VP. Habitual cheating is frequent and often engaged with very little thought being given on the part of the cheater.

Daniel Kahneman (2010) distinguishes between fast thinking and slow thinking. Habitual cheating is engaged through fast thinking. A little stress or an awkward interpersonal relationship triggers an automatic fabrication and/or elusive (or even illegal) behavior. The habitual cheater might not even be aware that they are cheating and will vehemently deny that it is occurring. For them, the purpose is held unconsciously—as a component of the cheater’s “tacit” knowledge (Polanyi, 2009). Habitual cheating is particularly difficult to address—given that the driving purpose is often not readily accessible: “I don’t know why I am lying. It is just something that I do. I can’t help myself!”.

Frequency can also be elusive with regard to its relationship to size. How do a cluster of soft cheats stack up against a few hard cheats? Which is worse? Which is more harmful? Which is easier for a professional coach to address with their client? The frequently occurring soft cheats are often habitual in nature and hard to address. The one-time hard cheat may be much easier to address. In some instances, a cheat is a much bigger thing when it has occurred only once. The one-time big cheat and big lie might relate to a one-time big purpose: “I am doing this to save my marriage!” “I am doing this to save our business!”

Behavioral psychologists noted many years ago that change in the reinforcement of a specific behavior is much more likely to have an immediate impact if this is the first time it is being reinforced. A change in the pattern of reinforcement is a big thing. Some other behavior was consistently being reinforced prior to this change: we were being praised for being a “caring” partner or “ethical” business owner. Now, suddenly, our partner in life doesn’t seem to care that we are caring (are they having an affair?). So we

“fool around” a bit at the out-of-town meeting and lie about what we were doing at this meeting. Our “ethical” behavior doesn’t seem to make any difference given the “unethical” behavior of our competitors. So, we decide to “bend the rules” a bit and do a bit of lying in order to remain economically viable as a business.

When reinforcement is inconsistent, then a one-time change in the reinforcement of a specific behavior is likely to have little impact. If the relationship I have with my spouse has been “rocky” for a long time, then a bit of lying and “fooling around” on my part is no big thing. Not much dissonance given that everything has been a bit “warped” in my marriage for many years. Our business has always been quite “agile” when it comes to the way in which we do business.

This is a sector of commerce that is known for a “kill or be killed” sense of ethics. It is survival of the fittest meaning that sometimes we need to “adjust” reality a bit with regard to the description of our products and reporting of our financial status. Major dissonance is much more likely to appear when there is a first-time lie and a one-time purpose behind the lie. Habitual lying along with large-scale and diffuse purposes will “cushion” the dissonance and make it much more difficult to modify or eliminate this harmful behavior.

What does all of this mean regarding reactions of other people to the cheating? When applied to cheating, the one-time sexual affair outside of marriage or the one time “cooking of the books” in a corporation is likely to be a much bigger deal than is an affair or alternation of the corporate ledger that occurs all-too-frequently. A cheater who strays from the path only once can be offered an insight regarding the reaction of other people (especially the “victim”) to an abrupt change in behavior.

Our cheater might declare that the response of other people to their one-time error in judgment is “way too strong”. However, it is precisely because their cheating is infrequent and unexpected that the reaction is great from the victim of the cheating: “ I have always trusted you and then this occurred!” “I don’t think our relationship can ever be the same again!” “You have been a trusted department head for many years, and now I find that you have altered the sales figures for this quarter. I’m not sure if I can ever look at your quarterly reports again without wondering if they are accurate!” “We have always looked to your organization as one that ‘tells the truth’—and now this happens!”

Systemic and Contagious: In considering frequency, we return again to the distinction to be drawn between complicate and complex. Cheating might be infrequent, but if it occurs within a complex system where all the parts are interconnected then frequency might not be particularly important—for the impact of the cheating will spread rapidly and other instances of cheating are likely to occur as the “system” (family or organization) adjusts to this cheat. A Cheating Environment is created in the home or organization. The purpose is broad in scope and deeply embedded.

Cheating becomes truly contagious—especially if it is found in and modeled by the leaders of the family (parent) or organization (president or chair of the board). We can often be of greatest benefit as professional coaches to our cheating client if we point out the potential of this broader systemic impact. At a family level, we might reiterate an insight offered by the composer, Stephen Sondheim, and lyricist, James Lupine, in their Broadway musical, *Into the Woods*. They note that “Children will Listen” and will learn from what we as parents do as well as what we say. If they observe us cheating, then they are themselves likely to cheat. Similarly in an organizational environment, members of the organization are likely to not just listen to the leaders of their organization but also observe their leaders’ behavior. All

organizations are “learning organizations” (Argyris and Schon, 1978) – it is just a matter of what is being learned.

Types of Cheating

This way to classify cheating is much less elusive than the matter of size and frequency—or is it? As we have already noted there is domestic cheating—when it involves one or more people who are important in our personal life. The underlying purpose is domestic, and the lying is highly personal. Then there is cheating that one engages in the organization where one is employed. The purpose often has to do with “the bottom line” (finances), though the related lying can be quite personal (relationship with others in the organization)

The third type of cheating occurs in our relationship with government agencies and, more generally, in the public domain. We cheat on our taxes. We contribute to a false narrative regarding the political motives or behavior of an elected official. We steal something from a store or lie to our neighbors. The purpose often resides in an alienation from the society in which we reside and/or a resentment of the government that is supposed to serve us. We lie because we “don’t give a sh#t or because we are being f#cked over by our local city hall.”

Each of these three types of cheating and attendant lying can be easily categorized – or is this always the case? First, the contagion of cheating knows no boundaries and the lying easily and rapidly spreads. We cheat on our wife and on our taxes. We distort the truth (lie!) regarding the quality of services being offered in our hotel. We misrepresent (lie about!) the record of a specific political figure who is chairing a committee investigating the operations of our hotel.

We can return to our distinction between complicated and complex systems. One type of cheating is often interwoven with other types of cheating. Lies are interdependent. The distortion of hotel services is directly related to the distortion of a political foe’s motivations and behavior. The expenses associated with an illicit affair are often hidden not just from ones’ partner but also from the IRS (via fraudulent tax reports).

There is also the related matter of one cheat that successfully leads to a second and third cheat. If we can get away with adultery that is either not discovered or is discovered but has no negative repercussions, then why not expand our cheating into other domains. If we can lie without being caught about the bottom line in our organization, then why not lie about consumer ratings of our product. We can return to our behavioral analysis. Periodic reinforcement is harder to overcome than constant reinforcement.

We don’t have to always be a successful cheater or successful liar for this behavior to be well established in our repertoire—especially when faced with the prospect of using the lie and cheat to avoid some negative consequence (going to jail, paying a fine, risking divorce). Even if we are caught some of the time, our cheating continues because we are not caught ALL THE TIME. Even if we are punished some of the time for purposeful lying, we keep engaging in lying because we get away with it sometimes. We only need to be successful in cheating on occasion for us to sustain and even expand this behavior in the future. Put simply, cheating is hard to extinguish!

Cost of Cheating and Lying

While we have identified the extent of harm as one of the three key ingredients in the identification of cheating and lying behavior and in the assessment of their magnitude, it is important to look more carefully into the nature of this harm. We need to say something about the “cost” of cheating and purposeful lying. Furthermore, we need to identify not only the physical or financial costs, but also the psychological costs (which are often the most damaging).

Financial costs are often reported—and can be quite dramatic. It is estimated that One Trillion dollars are not collected each year by the US Internal Revenue Service. Comparable financial numbers are available and reported at the state and local community level. There are also the costs associated with trying to prevent cheating on the reporting of taxes. And there are the financial contributions made to political campaigns both for expansion of and reduction of IRS review (as well as regarding the extensive regulations that govern the nature of and punishments to be meted out regarding cheating on tax reports).

What about physical costs? There is the reported violence associated with the occurrence of cheating and purposeful lying. The teenage son is slapped by his mother when he has lied once again about his whereabouts during the previous evening. The irate spouse takes out her revenge by taking a bat to her cheating husband’s head. Urban streets are saturated with violence associated with one drug lord cheating another drug lord. This violence makes for tantalizing news and captivating cop shows—but also produces a rate of homicide among the innocent as well as guilty that is repugnant.

This leaves us with the psychological costs. The person who has cheated might feel guilt—or at least anxious about being found out and punished. We know that guilt and anxiety tend to drain energy and distract us from tasks that need to be completed and relationships that need to be nourished. As we have already noted, there is also the need for adjustments in the system (family, organization, community) in which the cheating and purposeful lying has taken place. This adjustment requires not just determining the appropriate acknowledgement of the cheating and lying, but also the determination of appropriate punishment (if any) and the potentially shifting relationship with the cheater/liar.

We move even deeper into psychology as we consider the magnitude of cost. How guilty does the cheater feel? Does the liar become “numb” to the consequences of their behavior? Do they become habitual cheaters and liars. Do these people simply no longer acknowledge their cheating and the harm their lying produces. There is also the matter of side-effects. How much energy does it take to preserve the lie? What is the cheater sacrificing in terms of attention on behalf of the cheat? How big of an impact is the cheating and purposeful lying having on the “system” and how much adjustment has to be done?

We can ask the same questions of those who are “victims” of the cheating—whether or not they might actually be fully aware of the cheating. How guilty does the victim want the cheater to feel? And does the victim assume any of the guilt themselves: “what did I do to provoke the cheating?” Does the victim of perpetual lying become “numb” to the consequences of the liar’s behavior? Is this latest cheat just one more of many? In an organizational setting, does the cheat become “just the way business is being done.” Does everyone in the organization lie and cheat? Do we finally have to admit that the leaders of this company embrace a “cheating environment”?

There is again the matter of side-effects. How much energy does it take for the victim to collude in preserving the lie? Does the victim lie about the lie when relating to other people or is another set of lies required to cover over the cheater's lies? What is the victim sacrificing in terms of attention on behalf of the cheat? How big of an impact is the cheating having on the victim's own performance in and attitudes about the system in which both they and the cheater dwell (whether this be a family, organization or community). It seems that cheating is contagious in not only its spread, but also in its infection of the victim as well as the cheater.

Costs heap upon costs. Cheating is indeed harmful! Lies are never innocent or free of cost! In our recognition of these "truths" there is the possibility of change. Without this recognition there is likely to be denial or at the least complacency.

What Kinds of People Lie and Cheat?

Everyone cheats! All of us do! We all lie on purpose! Whether it is defrauding thousands of people out of their lifesavings in a Ponzi scheme or if it is a simple (and possibly helpful) event telling your spouse or partner that they "look great" in those new jeans, all of us tell mistruths or cheat at some level in our lives. Likely more often than most of us are willing to admit. As the country song goes: "there is cheating on our mind" -- and there is "lying in our heart!"

Research shows that most of us want to be - and believe we are - honest and moral (Ayal, Gino, Barkan, and Ariely, 2015). We work very hard at trying to maintain a positive self-image. The problem we have as humans is that we are very good at justifying our behaviors (Ego-defense). For example, we may justify cheating on our taxes because we believe that our tax system is unfair and rich people pay little or no taxes by finding loopholes, so why should we be compromised! Or we may justify driving above the legal speed limit because we are late for an important meeting and there's no one around to see us break the law. In extreme contexts, people may even justify murder given religious or extremist viewpoints. So, we humans are capable of justifying almost any kind of unethical behavior and then figure out a way to maintain our positive self-image.

Susceptibility

While all of us are susceptible to being unethical in one form or another, research shows that certain personalities are more likely to cheat or be dishonest than others. Williams et al (2010) describe the following:

"Students who cheat in high school and college are highly likely to fit the profile for subclinical psychopathy – a personality disorder defined by erratic lifestyle, manipulation, callousness and antisocial tendencies, according to research published by the American Psychological Association. These problematic students cheat because they feel entitled and disregard morality, the study found".

Indeed, other research shows that cheating behavior is partly heritable within the context of the personality trait "Honesty-Humility" (Kleinlogel, 2018):

“The personality factor of Honesty-Humility captures variation in sincerity, fairness, greed-avoidance, and modesty. Ashton and Lee (2007, p. 156) defined Honesty-Humility as “the tendency to be fair and genuine in dealing with others, in the sense of cooperating with others even when one might exploit them without suffering retaliation.” Negative adjectives representing low levels of Honesty-Humility include greedy, conceited, pretentious, and sly. **Honesty-Humility has been shown to be partly heritable** (Lewis & Bates, 2014), and the stability of personality by adulthood suggests that **Honesty-Humility is largely exogenous** and can be modelled as a predictor of outcomes.”

Youth, Cheating and Lying

Apologies to Gen X’s, Gen Y’s and those Gen Alpha’s – but the news is not good about your cheating behavior. Curtis and Hart's (2023) research suggest that age combined with “dark triad” personality types are more likely to lie and be dishonest in other ways (like cheating):

Age is probably the biggest factor (that defines being a liar). If we look at the frequency of lying across the time, across the lifespan, lying seems to peak in late adolescence. So it kind of gradually increases throughout childhood, peaks in late adolescence and then slowly declines across adulthood. So age is certainly the factor that we've identified so far that seems to be the strongest predictor of lying.

Then we also have personality traits. So your listeners are probably familiar with the dark triad personality traits, all these different malevolent personality traits, those tend to be associated with lying. Looking at kind of big five personality traits, we find that people who are low in agreeableness and high in neuroticism are more likely to lie. And then finally, people who have low self-esteem or are much more inclined to lie than those who have higher levels of self-esteem.

[Can a pathological liar be cured? with Drew Curtis, PhD, and Christian L. Hart, PhD](#)

This insight is helpful to coaches to be aware of behaviors and dialogue that suggests low self-esteem thinking and behaviors that suggest dark triad personality types, such as lack of remorse for being caught out for lying, or for lack of empathy for those who might have been harmed from unethical behaviors.

Cheating and Lying: Personal or Embedded

Cheating and purposeful lying are not only individual personality issues. As we have noted, these behaviors can be embedded in corporate culture. We have reported findings at the individual level, but there is also a group dynamic associated with unethical behavior – for example in corporations. Hall (2006) describes that honest individuals can become caught up in cheating behaviors when the corporate culture justifies (and even glorifies) it:

“... the organisation develops a collective ego (culture) that serves much the same function (and dysfunction) as the individual one. The collective egocentric bias is compounded by the diffusion of responsibility characteristic of large organisations, which encourages self-protective inference. It is quite likely, moreover, that people with a particular facility for rationalisation dominate organisational hierarchies. In business settings, promotion patterns place a premium on ‘team players’, those able to accommodate their attitudes to the immediate needs of the team (typically, as articulated by its leader). The highly judgmental person with strong convictions tends to get weeded out early on, those able to justify to themselves the pragmatic course of action move up”.

As Hall’s research clearly describes, cognitive biases and blind spots (described in a previous essay), can potentially play a big role in generally ethical individuals overlooking, justifying or ignoring unethical behaviors. For example, an ethical senior leader hired by an organization is likely to believe she/he have conducted their due diligence into the firm prior to being hired, and thereafter be less likely to be critical of the company’s ethics.

However, it is leaders and other influencers that shape corporate culture in the first place. And this is where coaching can have the biggest impact. As Hall notes:

“Clearly, it is generally productive for corporations to employ individuals who are confident and have a high self-image. (But) It can lead to risk-taking, innovation and a can-do approach. However, it can also lead towards narcissism and dishonest behaviour”.

Hall continues to describe what both of us have personally experienced (and about which we have previously written). Senior executives tend to develop high levels of hubris over years of success—and are surrounded by sycophants who praise and support the leader despite their concerning and unethical behaviors. This kind of hubris supported and encouraged by “kissing the ring” can lead to overestimation of one’s skills and knowledge levels and result in poor judgement and sometimes unethical decision-making – a feeling of infallibility!

The path to cheating and lying is often a slippery slope – small incremental decisions, which are initially not considered unethical, but tolerated by the company, that become “the way we do things” and ultimately become part of the corporate culture. An article written by Merete Wedell-Wedellsborg (2019) that appeared in the *Harvard Business Review* provides a powerful quote from Warren Buffet:

“Warren Buffett, explaining Berkshire Hathaway’s practices in the annual letter shareholders, notes that he and vice chairman Charlie Munger “...have seen all sorts of bad corporate behavior, both accounting and operational, induced by the desire of management to meet Wall Street expectations. What starts as an ‘innocent’ fudge in order to not disappoint ‘the Street’ — say, trade-loading at quarter-end, turning a blind eye to rising insurance losses, or drawing down a ‘cookie-jar’ reserve — can become the first step toward full-fledged fraud.””

Buffett’s note is important because it’s really about the majority of us: neither saints nor criminals but well-meaning leaders who sometimes fail to consult their moral compass while speeding ahead in a landscape full of tripwires and pitfalls. For that majority, moral leadership is not simply a question of acting in good or bad faith. It is about navigating the vast space in between.

Susceptibility

Don't fool yourself - We are all susceptible to cheating and lying! As Warren Buffett (the "Oracle of Omaha") suggests, there are certain personality types that are more likely to cheat and lie to achieve their goals (purposes). Nevertheless, as Buffett notes, all of us are susceptible. One of us [KW] worked on a project with a well-known energy company developing methods to reduce unethical behavior of employees (specifically, employees, including senior leaders, stealing corporate secrets for their own use. This concept and type of consulting work is generally referred to as "insider risks or insider threats" consulting). The high-level insights from my work in this area shows the following:

- * Anyone and everyone is a potential cheat – given the right circumstances.
- * The definition of cheating (in a specific company) is often vague, and this vagueness can greatly magnify the opportunity to cheat and spiral out of control.
- * Corporate systems, rules and processes can either foster unethical behavior or inhibit it (as describe in my eBook "The House of Culture").
- * Training programs on corporate ethics (on their own and in isolation) are largely ineffective (Why ethics training doesn't work - NH Business Review (nhbr.com))
- * A deep understanding of what drives an individual's behavior (see my article in the Library of Professional Coaching - Why Do People Behave the Way They Do? | Library of Professional Coaching) is important for mitigation methods to be most effective).
- * It is important (and possible) to reduce the incidence of high-risk taking personalities that work for the organization.

Clearly, some of us are more prone than others when it comes to cheating and purposeful lying. While all of us are susceptible to being unethical in one form or another, research shows that certain personalities are more likely to cheat or be dishonest than others. While the findings presented by Williams and his colleagues (2010) regarding high school and college student are at the individual level, there is also a group dynamic related to unethical and cheating behavior – for example in corporations. As Hall (2006) notes, honest individuals can become caught up in cheating behaviors when the corporate culture justifies (and even glorifies) it. This is similar to someone buying an expensive car, which thereafter experiencing significant quality problems. The purchaser then finds ways to justify the purchase despite these problems. This cognitive bias (justifying behavior) is likely to be more common in more junior employees who feel the need to adapt to corporate culture.

"BIG FISH" Who Cheat

As we have commented above, Anyone and everyone is a potential cheat. When it comes to lying and cheating, no one is immune. At time of writing, this news article was posted on CNN.com (Lillis and Perez, 2023):

The insular world of FBI counterintelligence agents was rocked last month when one of their own, Charles F. McGonigal, formerly the FBI's top counterintelligence official in New York, was

indicted for allegedly selling access to Russian and Albanian officials in exchange for hundreds of thousands of dollars in cash.

Former FBI officials who worked with McGonigal told CNN they were stunned, disappointed, and “pissed off” when they learned the news. One called the charges, “horrificing.”

This guy was unbelievably respected and really seen as a career counterintelligence expert,” according to a former senior FBI official who worked with McGonigal. “He was one of these rockstars in [counterintelligence] who, when hard jobs, when very sensitive assignments came up, he was on the shortlist of people that you would look to and say, ‘Hey, where’s Charlie, what’s he doing for the next six months?’

Speculation has swirled around the potential damage McGonigal may have caused, including whether he exposed any sensitive information that could damage US national security. As a senior counterintelligence official, McGonigal had access to some of the most sensitive information in the FBI’s possession, as well as the CIA’s and other agencies’ information.

Leadership coaches and consultants who operate independently of the corporate culture are often best able to observe and identify these behaviors in their clients (corporate culture as well as individual personalities) and help leaders cultivate a more ethical culture and set of behaviors.

When Personality crashes into Circumstance

We have described some of the personality types that are more likely to cheat and lie, but the potential to lie and cheat is greatly enhanced when circumstances and opportunity maximize this potential. Our experience suggests that there are a number of key factors that can increase the likelihood of an employee engaging in cheating and lying behavior (of which, all of these can be identified and influenced by leadership coaches and consultants):

- Access to sensitive information: Employees with access to sensitive information are more likely to abuse their privileges if they have malicious intent or if their personal circumstances create personal stress – for example, divorce and financial problems (see next).
- Stress and personal problems: Financial difficulties, family problems, or job dissatisfaction and resentment can increase the likelihood of employees committing fraudulent activities. These kinds of situations can be effectively identified by ethnographic techniques.
- Power and trust: Employees with a high level of trust and power within the organization are more likely to abuse their privileges if they feel they can get away with it (The CNN.com news item described previously about the FBI is a good example of this)
- Weaknesses in the company's security measures: If the company's security measures are lax or easily bypassed, it increases the likelihood that employees will engage in malicious activities. In these situations, personality is likely the more powerful driver of bad behavior
- Lack of consequences: If there is a perception that the consequences for cheating and lying are minimal or non-existent, it may increase the likelihood of such activities.

It's important to recognize that these factors can increase the risk of an employee engaging in cheating and lying behaviors, but they don't necessarily cause them. As we shall note, professional coaches who operate independently of the corporate culture are often best able to identify these behaviors in their clients (corporate culture as well as individual personalities) and help leaders cultivate a more ethical

culture and set of behaviors. Consultants specializing in “insider threats” and in corporate culture are in a good position to analyze the risks and develop mechanisms to reduce the risk.

The Dynamics of Cheating and Purposeful Lying

What happens when someone faces the “fact” that they have cheated and lied about their cheating. What is stirred up when there is recognition that one’s life is filled with lies? Crucially, a state of cognitive dissonance is often created--unless the cheater and liar is completely without any sense of values or personal integrity [this lack of an “super-ego” functioning may be classified as a serious mental health issue (sociopathy/psychopathy). It might even be associated with a lack of mirror neurons.]

The dissonance resides in the disparity between the act of cheating and lying on the one hand, and a sense of self, on the other hand, as a thoughtful, caring, mature, responsible human being. What is to be done for this state of dissonance to be resolved. One answer is to readjust one’s perception of self: “Yes, I am a flawed human being.” If this option is chosen then the result might very well be depression, substance abuse and even self-inflicted wounds. The other answer is to do something about the cheating and lying behavior by addressing the underlying purpose. One can justify the cheating and lying (thereby making it “not such a bad thing to do”). One can do something that might seem “bad” but is in behalf of a “greater good.” Or one can cheat and lie in “payment” (reparations) for the cheating and lying of another person or organization.

Justification

With two sides of one’s perception on self being at peril, one of the solutions is to consider the cheating to be appropriate and “justified.” The purpose makes it “OK.” The underlying and guiding purpose makes the subsequent behavior acceptable. We might have cheated because someone else has already cheated on us or done us physical or psychological harm. We “return the favor” by cheating on them. This justification can be framed as Frontier justice: “I am just getting even with them!” or “I have every right to pay them back!” This is the *Revenge Factor*. We see it played out in virtually every Western movie and in numerous Soap Operas.

The justification might also be presented as a more high-minded form of legalist “balancing of the books” The matter is closed only when both parties have received their due “reward” and “punishment.” If one side has only been the victim and the side only the perpetrator, then a judicial tension exists that ultimately leaves neither party satisfied. One party is left with the damage and anger associated with the damage, while the party is left with the guilt.

There is a scene in *The Lincoln Highway*, by Amos Towles, where one of the main characters who has done wrong (cheated) to another character goes up to them and asks them to punch him in the face. The victimized character does not even know that the person asking to be punched was the perpetrator. The books are being balanced in the opposite direction. A punch in the face will help reduce cognitive dissonance for the perpetrator. They will feel less guilty. This is the *Rectification Factor*.

Passion

As a cheater we can also blame it on our unbridled feelings. We lie because we are caught in the embrace of a strong emotion. These feelings and emotions can be quite noble in character: “I simply couldn’t tell her the truth. It would have absolutely destroyed her!” Our feelings can also have a less admirable and more primitive source: “I was very mad at him and acted in a very stupid manner.” Dr. Freud (1990) would attribute some cheating to the dominance of the Id. Freud wrote about “slips of the tongue” that enable unconscious (and socially unacceptable thoughts and feelings to slip out). He probably would find that lies are similarly generated in many instances from unconsciously motivated drives toward safety, revenge and (most importantly) eventual gratification of primitive needs. Freud’s one time associated, Carl Jung (2013) would point instead to the emergence of ancient pulls toward deception (the trickster) or achievement of great victories on behalf of noble purposes (the warrior).

When passion is employed to explain cheating and lying behavior, the cognitive dissonance has been reduced by the cheater/liar. This person has split themselves in two. They are both the “rational” and “irrational” person. In many cases, cheater can blame some outside source for the irrationality. They “made me mad.” “Their flirting with other men made me jealous.” There is always the booze, drugs and raw sex to blame as an internal source. And the ultimate fallback is Flip Wilson’s famous statement: “the Devil made me do it!”

Convenience

A much less passionate reason to cheat is often to be found among people in most “civilized” societies. It is simply a matter of altering reality a bit so that we can “get by” in our community – or even thrive. We just “grease the wheel” a little by offering a small bribe. We spend the night on the road (attending a conference) with a woman from our office. Not a big deal—just a way to reduce the tensions associated with a hard day of promoting our product. I want to build a “trusting” relationship with my new boss, so I avoid telling her about my concerns with the former boss.

The cognitive dissonance is reduced (if not fully eliminated) by reducing the magnitude of the cheat or lie—or at least our estimate of the magnitude. It is “not a big thing” and, as we have already noted, it is what “everyone does every day of their life.” Cheating becomes a convenient way in which to operate in our life and work. Lying often becomes habitual and may even become “invisible” (tacit knowledge) for the liar—until they are “discovered” by someone and have to face the reality of their aberrant behavior.

Priorities

This is the trickiest source of cheating—and the one type of lie that might be most excusable – or even encouraged. It ultimately comes down to a matter of purpose. We are often caught in a dilemma where there are two (or more) priorities that are in conflict. Sometime this means that if we move in one direction there will be one beneficial outcome—but it will be at the expense of another outcome that is just as beneficial. We save money for our child’s education, but this means living with an inadequate health insurance plan. Our company is investing in a new software program but at the expense of an employee development program. These dilemmas can often produce polarities that lead to a dysfunctional swinging back and forth between the two pathways (Johnson, 1996).

It is a quite different, but equally as challenging situation, when one pathway requires that we cheat. We very much want our daughter to be able to attend her brother's piano recital and decide to "fib" by sending a note to her school indicating that she is ill. Our organization is serving food to those men, women and children living on the streets in our city. A grant is available to help subsidize our program, but it requires that a licensed social worker be available to provide support services to the people coming in for a meal. We don't have a certified social worker, but we do have an extraordinary person who has been providing support services for many years to our street people. We "lie" in our application for funding. The leaders of our nation bend the rules regarding disarmament to ensure that we are keeping up with our "enemy" (who we "know" is also bending the rules).

There is something more important in our life that always be law-abiding. We speed a bit in order to get to work on time. Is this excusable? We speed in order to get our wife who is in labor to the hospital. Is this excusable? There are competing priorities. Which ones justify cheating and the breaking of laws? As we seek out answers to these questions, the matter of facing dilemmas and managing polarities comes to the fore. How do we as a coach help our befuddled and torn-apart client enter into thoughtful problem-solving and decision-making in the face of these cheating challenges? It is to these coaching strategies that we now turn.

Addressing the Cheat and Purposeful Lie

Cheating has been with us a long, long time. It seems that human beings have a unique cognitive skill. They can lie—which means making up things that don't really exist. As far as we know, no other animal has this capacity. They might be able to change colors or shapes (in order to hide), but they don't display any tendency to direct our attention to something that doesn't exist (at least at the present time)

On the one hand, this means that homo sapiens have the capacity to imagine attacking lions that aren't really there—whether these lions be entities that might do us physical harm or lions that are represented in the behavior of an irresponsible teenager or pending corporate board meetings (Sapolsky, 2004) On the other hand, this also means that people can tell a lie to cover up a mis-deed or can imagine that there is no lion (e.g. no repercussions from adultery) when a real lion is ready to attack (spouse ready to file for divorce having discovered the adultery).

Given the universal presence of cheating and purposeful lying within human societies, there is an accompanying history of strategies for dealing with the cheat and lie. Essentially, over many centuries and there are three ways in which cheating and lying have been addressed in many societies. One way involves *Emotional Reparation*. The harm done to the perpetrator is addressed so that guilt might be relieved. The person who is cheating has become unfrozen and is ready to rectify their cheating behavior. The lie has been acknowledged and a change in behavior is promised.

The second way in which to address cheating involves "cutting directly to the chase." Actions are taken to minimize the harm done to other people or to "pay back" the harm that has already been done. The liar is required to correct their lie in public or in some written statement that is widely circulated. A truth and reconciliation process is engaged or a mock trial is held where the liar is forced to confess their "sin." This is *Active Rectification*. As the name implies, this involves actions that move beyond emotional reparation.

The third way in which to address cheating and purposeful lying is the most challenging – and ultimately the most beneficial. It is *Behavior Change*. The outcome of this third way is quite simple and direct. The cheater quits cheating. The liar begins to tell the truth. This might mean a universal commitment: no more cheating ever! Nothing but the truth and the whole truth! This is usually not a realistic goal. A much more realistic outcome is for the cheater to cease a particular type of cheating (domestic, financial, etc.) or for them to at least reduce the frequency or severity of the cheating or lying. How do each of these three historic ways operate when addressing the cheat? We turn to each way.

Reparation: Emotions

Given that cheating, purposeful lying, and related “crimes and misdemeanors” have occurred throughout human history, it is not surprising to find that many procedures are deployed to help address these issues. Often, the personal or societal transgression is viewed as a spiritual matter—which is why testimony in a courtroom often requires someone to swear on a bible (or other religious document) that they are telling the “truth.” When a major lie has been told inside or outside the courtroom, then the trust or rule of God (or multiple Gods) has/have been violated. A sin has been committed. Rituals are engaged that enable the transgressor to be “purified” or at least forgiven.

In the Catholic Church this can take place in a confessional booth with follow up acts of contrition. Some “Hail Marys” help and a few coins or bills in the collection basket can prove beneficial in the eyes of the transgressor (if not God). Other churches ask for a portion of one’s income as a way to provide “universal coverage” for sins such as cheating. Once again, this tithing might be meant for those living on earth more than for any God in heaven.

In the Protestant Church, we find a God who is not “bought off” by contrition; rather, the Protestant God provides Grace that is unconditional. As sinners, Protestant cheaters must come to terms with their own misdeeds by first changing their heart and subsequently changing their behavior. A noted psychologist, O. Hobart Mowrer, blended his own behavioral perspectives with a strong Protestant perspective, proposing that our experience of anxiety is itself a sign that we are not aligned with God’s commandments. We will seek to be anxious, as cheaters, when we recognize that we have “sinned” and when we change our behavior.

Other religious traditions require some public act of contrition, such as punishing oneself (flagellation), confessing to one’s sin(s) in a public forum, or at least begging the victim for forgiveness and absolution. Our Freudian colleagues might suggest that these acts of reparation are guided by an active super-ego. Countering the irrational and impulsive urges of the Id which induce cheating, super-ego functions are not only meant to block the enactment of these urges, but also to punish their host for even thinking about cheating. As the country-western song goes, “do you have cheating on your mind.” If you do, then there is likely to be a feeling of guilt and a desire to somehow reclaim the self-image of integrity and goodness (which the super-ego demands of us).

Aside from personal super-ego functions, there are also public institutions that have been established to address anti-social matters such as cheating and purposeful lying. We find that sanctuaries are established in some societies to which transgressors travel and in which they often are required to ponder on the nature of and reasons for the sin they have committed. As is to be the outcome of

successful Catholic confession, the sinner hopefully will depart the sanctuary with new insights and a commitment to reforming their behavior.

There are other forms of reparation that take on a more public character. Reparations are found in acts that require the transgressor to do something in their community that counters the harm they have done. They “make amends.” This often means engaging in charity—which enables the perpetrator to feel good after feeling bad (guilt). The community and specifically the victim is also likely to feel a bit better after witnessed the perpetrator do some good (especially if this “good” benefits the victim). An important question must be posed: does this form of reparation work or does it just encourage future cheating (or other anti-social acts)?

One of us [WB] had a chance to attend a course taught by James Luther Adams, a noted theological and social historian. Adams devoted considerable time to this matter of charity and the role it plays in reparation of personal and collective guilt. He suggests that charity often serves as a substitute for genuine social reform. We offer those who are poor a handout rather than a hand-up. We help to fund a hospital that primarily serves those who are addicted to opiates rather than helping to pass laws and establish policies that prevent this addiction in the first place. As Adams noted, the word “handicap” comes from the old tradition of those who are disabled sitting on the street corner with their cap in hand asking us to drop a few pittances into the hat to support them and their family. Guilt is assuaged but nothing really changes in society. The cheater can go back to cheating, knowing that there is a vehicle for their personal reparation.

Rectification: Actions

While reparation might benefit the cheater and liar, it does not necessary do anything to repair the damage that has been done. Do I seek in some way to “heal” other people who I have wounded through my cheating? Do I try to correct a mistake I have made in reporting a falsehood to my spouse or friend? Do I not only tell the truth but also do something to make up for this misrepresentation of reality? At the very least do I tell them that I am sorry? Can I do something more?

There is the matter of social exchange vs. market exchange—which is an important distinction being drawn in recent years by behavioral economists. If a market exchange is engaged when seeking rectification, then there will be an exchange of money or something else of financial value. I pay you for the harm I have done. I pay the hospital or psychotherapy bills. Our company compensates your company for the erroneous advertisements we have produced about your company. I pay alimony as a “cost” associated with adultery and subsequent divorce.

If the rectification is to take place through a social exchange, then I take you out to dinner or send you flowers in recognition of the minor harm I have done in telling you I was at work last night (when I was really out at a bar with my buddies). I come to visit you every evening at the hospital after I have failed to tell you last week that I forgot to get the medication you require. My marketing department is going to host a special party for members of the sales department because we told them that the ad was going in this month when it actually will not appear till next month (after the sales campaign has already been underway for two weeks). No money changes hands—though some money will be spent on the dinner, flowers and party. We could just give this money to the aggrieved party, but this would probably add insult to injury. Some cheating is never forgiven with financial compensation.

And how do I seek to “heal” myself? There might be acts of emotional reparation such as we identified above. However, this might not be enough. The financial compensation or the dinner and flowers might be as much for the liar(s) as for those who have been harmed. Many times, it is not enough to just feel better if cognitive dissonance is to be resolved. Some concrete actions must be taken to rectify the situation if I am to consider myself to once again be a “decent person.” We are often our harshest critic. We know that appeasing God through money in the basket is doing nothing for our self-image. We don’t quite believe that God’s opinion of us is positive—no matter how forgiving God can be. We often can see through our own veil of false reparation. We yell at ourself: “show me the money [that you have given to the victim]!” Better yet, “show me through concrete action how you have made up for the harm that was done.”

Change: Behavioral Patterns

Even if we have somehow made up for the harm that was done as a result of our cheating or purposeful lying, there is still the matter of change in behavior. As we have already noted, this third outcome is often the hardest of the three to achieve. A critical question must be posed: how might behavior change take place and who is monitoring the progress toward the desired outcome? Who should be aware that cheating has occurred, and that the cheater is trying to change their behavior? Do we lie about the lying? Do we not share plans regarding the potential behavior change (in order not to get up too many hopes)—and is not sharing itself a form of cheating? As we have frequently noted, cheating and lying are contagious. No wonder that many coaches, therapists and members of the judicial system tend to run away from cheaters and liars who are seeking assistance.

There is also the matter of tolerating a little bit of cheating—in order to be “realistic”. Since we all “fib” a bit, there is no harm in excusing the soft lie told by our spouse. As in the case of alcoholism, smoking and other addictive behaviors, an important question can be broached: if a little bit of cheating is still allowed then will it grow into larger and more frequent cheating? Is there really such a thing as “healthy” infrequent and small cheating? And is there really such a thing as a minor lie? Does not a little bit of untruth do harm?

Third, there is the matter of state versus trait. Is the person cheating because it is somehow in their “blood” (personality trait) – as we discussed earlier. Are some people “born” to lie? Conversely, is the cheater operating in an environment where cheating is commonly present and often rewarded. The cheater is cheating because this behavior is “in the water” of the setting in which they are often operating. This is a family or organization in which everyone does a bit of lying. We actually commend a brilliant “sport lie.” This is a matter of state rather than trait.

Overcoming the compulsion to cheat and lie

Given these cautionary notes, we can offer several important strategies that are each based in a fundamental question. First, do I tell the truth to someone? I have invested considerable energy in keeping everything “under wraps.” Now what do I do? Should I tell the truth to anyone other than the priest or coach? We might find it reasonable to do the confessional in a step-by-step fashion. We begin by telling someone who is our confidant regarding other matters or someone who is either quite

forgiving regarding these kind of matters (perhaps because they are something of a cheater themselves) or has little invested in (is not harmed by) this act of cheating. After this “dress rehearsal” we might tell someone who is invested but is forgiving or at least understanding. This person could also offer advice regarding how best to approach the person (or people) who have been most harmed by the cheat.

While we have focused on the personal level of cheating, a similar stage-based approach might be taken in an organizational setting. We first talk with those from other organizations with whom we have established a trusting relationship and with members of the media who have always been “our friends” when it comes to holding back damaging information until it has been carefully framed. We are not only using this initial contact as a “dress rehearsal” but also asking these folks who are “on our side” to offer advice regarding how to contact those who have been hurt as well as the more general public (via multiple media sources). What we do know is that organizations (and particularly corporations) are more likely to survive a cheat when it is shared openly and when a genuine apology is offered. The cheating that is hidden, denied and never accompanied by an apology is inevitably the most damaging when it is discovered.

The Second question to ask is perhaps the most obvious and most difficult to answer. Do I quit violating the norm? To what extent do I quite cheating? How honest do I become? As we have already noted, the partial withdrawal from any addictive behavior is hard to sustain. On the other hand, it is very hard to abandon this behavior all together. This is certainly the case with cheating. Can we find a way to “try out” not cheating? Do we find an alternative way to deal with a difficult situation other than taking the usual way out by lying? While we can try to avoid difficult situations, this is usually unrealistic? It is more likely that the difficult situations will occur again. We have to learn how to deal with them in a more constructive manner. This where a coach or close, wise friend can be of great value. We meet with them to identify alternative behaviors.

A third question must be asked of the cheater and purposeful liar. What is the cost associated with the alternative behavior? Sometimes being honest is quite costly—especially when someone has grown accustomed to our lies. They might prefer our flattery to realistic appraisals of their appearance or behavior. Vague promises might be welcomed when the alternative is a stark and perhaps quite negative prediction regarding the outcomes of a specific decision or action.

As the behavioral economists have taught us, it is much more rewarding to dream of positive outcomes than of negative outcomes. We must be diligent in engaging not just after-the-fact (‘postmortem’) reflections on the outcomes of actions taken, but also in “premortem” assessments of both positive and negative outcomes of a risky action such as disclosure of cheating behavior (Kahneman, 2011; Bergquist 2014).

We must prepare for the bad as well as the good. Yes, someone might let us know that they “appreciate” our candor or are “relieved” to know what is really going on and how we really feel. However, they might instead be profoundly disappointed, quite angry and absolutely unforgiving with regard to what we have done – and even the act of disclosing to them that which we have done. It is better for some people to not know what is going on. Reality for them might “suck!”—especially when it is being conveyed by someone they trust (and might even love). This where “dress rehearsal” is of great value—especially when negative outcomes are played out and subsequent responses by the discloser are identified and tested out.

Finally, there is a fourth question to ask when seeking to change a pattern of behavior. How do I make the change given the “web” (system) in which my cheating (like most cheating) is snared. Can I really stop lying in a setting that encourages “skillful” lying? Behavioral psychologists often propose that we must “re-program the environment” if sustained change of behavior is to take place. We might simply avoid settings in which we are inclined to cheat—but as we have noted this is often difficult to do. The cheating occurs when we are engaged in job-related travel. Our spouse asks how the meeting went and waits expectantly to hear that it went well—rather than hearing what I did “after hours” that was “sinful”. Our company must continue to compete against a rival who always “lies” or operates in a country with a much different code of ethics.

It's not always us!

We also might try to change the environment in which we operate. This usually requires the assistance of other people in our life. For instances, we meet with our spouse and find a way to avoid conflict or vow to bring up and resolve conflicts at least 24 hours before we head off on the road. We might also invite our children to tell us when they are considering having unprotected sex with someone they have been dating.

At this point, as parents, we don’t punish our children or somehow ban them from meeting with this other person; rather, we ensure that they know about and have access to safe sex practices. We realize that we can’t prevent the act, but we can help to change the “environment” (sexual protection) in which the potential act might be taking place. Our child needs no longer to lie—they can now accept our assistance in gaining a bit more control over their future life (with regard to the potential of an unwanted pregnancy or sexually-transmitted disease).

In an organization setting, we might try to change the environment by becoming collectively clear about and finding ways to reinforce our company-wide code of ethics. Instead, we could identify situations which have called for cheating and convene meetings (such as focus groups) where alternative responses are identified and subsequently taught to members of the organization. We might also meet with our competitors to establish a “fair” ground in which to compete (without violating laws regarding collusion). In a political setting (where lying is all too frequent) there might be an agreement among the opponents to run a “clean” campaign with minimal distortion of the truth. This perhaps a “pipedream” though we do know that this type of campaign is viewed favorably by many citizens and both the winner and loser of the campaign is often viewed more favorably.

Cheating can become embedded into an organization’s culture – behavior that produced success in the past (especially when manifest by founders and top leaders) becomes entrenched as the “way to do things”. Subsequently, systems, processes and procedures incorporate the implied behaviors. For example, WorldCom accounting processes entrenched the CEO’s (Bernie Ebbers) business strategy.

In other cases, overly ambitious sales targets set by senior leaders and incentivized by large bonuses, can cause salespeople to use fraudulent tactics to meet these targets or cause them to submit false sales reports. An example of this is that of Wells Fargo Bank where intense pressure from sales management caused sales employees to open bogus accounts in the names of customers without their knowledge. This ultimately resulted in a 3 billion dollar fine. These mechanisms then become entrenched. To overcome these entrenched problems, organizational leaders should not only look for

embedded beliefs and behaviors, but also systems, processes and procedures that embed and encourage cheating and fabrication of a false reality.

Coaching and Consulting with a Cheater and Purposeful Liar

Is there something specific we need to know and something specific we need to do if coaching someone who has disclosed that they have cheated in some way. As professional coaches we are guided (as is the case of all human service professions) by a code of ethics. This code includes an implicit (if not explicit) commitment to reduce harm (and to help “heal” the harm that has been done). We are faced with a critical decision when confronted with cheating among clients with whom we are working or potentially could be working. We can step away from this coaching engagement and accept the fact (or at least prospect) that harm might continue to be wrought by the cheater. Alternatively, we can seek to reduce the harm being done by working with the cheating client to bring an end to this destructive behavior.

What Kind of Coaching to Do

First, we need to assign this type of coaching to a specific category. One of us (WB) has prepared a taxonomy on coaching strategies with a colleague (Agnes Mura). Coaching a cheater would be assigned to a category we identified as “Ethics Coaching.” This category includes the important (but rarely engaged or at least rarely acknowledged) work with a client who is making an important decision regarding several competing priorities that are embedded in potentially conflicting value systems.

This category also includes the kind of thoughtful proactive coaching that is engaged with a client who is seeking to identify their personal “code of conduct” or, more generally, is engaged in life planning. We assist them in gaining some clarity regarding what is most important in their life and what they are willing to sacrifice on behalf of these highest priorities. John Lazar joined with one of us (WB) in preparing an essay on the nature and purpose of what at the time was called “Alignment Coaching.”

Coaching that focuses on cheating fits in this category but is a quite different species! It concerns unethical behavior that has already occurred, rather than being a proactive process that can assist our client in making the right choice when confronted with multiple pathways. When coaching the cheater, we are acting more like a priest who is taking a confession than we are acting like a modern day, secular provider of guidance to a decision maker. Many emotions are inevitably interwoven with the coaching of cheaters and our own ethical considerations must be taken into account when agreeing to and operating in this challenging coaching engagement.

Given that cheating is widespread (if not universal) and that a very challenging form of coaching is required to address the issues embedded in cheating, we wish to offer some of our own thoughts about how to coach the cheater.

Judgment, Polarity, Empathy and Diffusion of Boundaries

Is it OK to coach a cheater? When? How long? What are the boundaries? Is cheating contagious and systemic (which means that we can blame the system rather than the individual cheater)? Each of these

questions becomes quite relevant when one is faced, as a coach, with the potential of serving someone whom we know (or at least believe) has engaged extensively in cheating. In beginning to answer these important questions it is essential that we begin by examining our own behavior—inside and outside our work as a professional coach.

What if I, as a coach (or in my non-coaching work and life), have never cheated—or at least don't believe I have cheated? If this is the case, then the primary concern is likely to be one of becoming judgmental of my client's actions. I 'm caught in a moral dilemma. Do I work with this cheater as a coach—and if I am doing so, then am I in some way colluding with the cheater and do I risk the possibility that I am somehow unknowingly assisting the cheater's behavior (much as is the case with someone who is co-dependent with an addict).

If I don't assist this cheater, then I am simply sitting back and allowing someone to go unassisted in struggling with their own moral dilemma (or seeking to ignore or somehow justify their cheating behavior. We are caught in a polarity. As we have already noted, cheating and lying often reside in polarities that lead to a dysfunctional swinging back and forth between the two pathways (Johnson, 1996). The polarities experienced by our coaching client are strong candidates for professional coaching—especially executive coaching that focuses on problem-solving and decision-making processes (Bergquist and Mura, 2011; Weitz and Bergquist, 2023). We would also point out, however, that coaches themselves are often caught up in a challenging moral polarity when deciding whether or not to coach someone who is displaying extensive cheating behavior.

If I as a coach have cheated myself (which is more likely) then the primary concern is likely to be finding a way to be empathetic without losing the boundaries between myself and my client. Will my client's recounting of their own cheating elicit memories of my own cheating? Am I likely to be processing my own personal feelings about being a cheater (especially the guilt) rather than attending to my client's experiences and feelings? How do I remain in any way "objective" when the cheater's behavior produces a highly subjective perspective on my part? Am I a hypocrite when encouraging my client to reduce or eliminate their cheating behavior if I continue to be a cheater myself and might not "own up" to my cheating with my client? When the boundaries get fuzzy, then we are inevitably of little use to our coaching client.

Ethics

We can also address our concerns regarding the coaching of a cheater by reflecting on our own criteria for making a decision about what to do. The work of William Perry (1998) provides some important insights and guidance in this regard. While studying college students attending Harvard University, Perry formulated a model that describes four stages in not only intellectual development but also the development of ethical standards. While Harvard undergraduates are certainly not a "normal" population from which to extract general conclusions, the descriptions offered by Perry seem to have hit the mark when it comes to providing insight about the way people from all walks of life tend to think and make ethical decisions.

The first of Perry's four stages is labeled "Dualism." In the domain of ethical reasoning, Perry is offering a description of first stage reasoning that is directly aligned with the first stages identified by Piaget in his classic study of moral judgment (1997). The ethics at this first stage are defined by an external

authority. The “good book” or sharia law tells us what we should do, as does our esteemed preacher, priest rabbi or Imam. There is no question regarding what is “right” and what is “wrong” with regard to how we behave. For a dualist who cheats this means that there is the potential for profound dissonance.

Typically, the dualistic perpetrator is in massive denial regarding their transgressions—they are not easily coached. At times, they might be justifying their creating behavior by portraying (in dualistic style) the absolute evil of their adversary (those who do not abide by the “correct” standards of behavior and the “God-given” values that form the foundation of a desired society). It is understandable that one cheats if it means doing what is “right in the world.” We are reminded of many passages in the Torah (Old Testament) where the “good people” lie in order to overcome the “bad people.”

We offer an entertaining and fascinating example of this dualistic justification of bad behavior in achieving “right in the world.” The example is to be found in a recent movie series called “Billions.” A Manhattan district attorney obsessively goes after a highly successful and charismatic hedge fund manager. While the DA justifies highly questionable techniques to entrap the hedge fund manager, the fund manager demonstrates many kind and benevolent behaviors. The emotions that these episodes create are simultaneously and interchangeably empathy and admiration along with contempt and distaste for both of these characters. The message delivered in this story challenges dualism: “good/bad” and “right/wrong” are a matter of perception and context.

As a coach, one must be very careful in confronting a dualistic client regarding this justification—for we can easily be identified as one of the “enemies” (or someone “colluding” with or “sympathetic” to the enemy’s cause).

For Perry, there is often a movement past ethical dualism as one begins to engage the “real” world with all of its ambiguity--and in recent years the challenges of volatility, uncertainty, complexity, turbulence and, in particular, contradiction (VUCA-Plus, Bergquist, 2020). If “right” and “wrong” are not always clearly present in the books we read (or in the movies we watch) and the authoritative pronouncements we hear, then what are we to do?

There is the notable Jewish tale regarding the wise rabbi (who certainly is not a dualist). The rabbi’s assistant observes how the rabbi listens carefully to the complaints made by a member of the rabbi’s synagogue against another member. At the end of this conversation, the rabbi declares that the appellant is “right” – “absolutely right.” The adversary now enters and recounts their version of the story to the rabbi. At the conclusion of this alternative narrative, the rabbi declares “you are right, absolutely right.” When the second member leaves the room, the rabbi’s assistant speaks out in exasperation: “Rabbi, both of these men can’t be right! One of them must be wrong!” The Rabbi replies to his assistant: “Your are right, absolutely right.” The assistant is caught in a moment of learning and development at this point. If there is no obvious “good” and “bad” then perhaps there are multiple truths that must all be embraced.

Unfortunately, William Perry finds that this movement to what we call a Relativist perspective is not what usually occurs. Rather, there is the movement (at least temporarily) to what he calls a Multiplicity which is almost anarchist and is certainly a source of profound cynicism (based on a sense that the authority has betrayed us). If there are no ethical guidelines to follow—then what should we do? If our priest or rabbi has been “messing with our minds” or not telling us how we really should behave in the world—then where should we turn for guidance—and should we trust anyone in authority? Perhaps, it

is now the matter of doing what is expedient and of personal benefit to me, my family, or my clan. Instead of the “golden rule” there is now “those who rule hold the gold!” and they are the new “authority” that we should follow (until someone else with more gold shows up). The potential client who resides in a state of ethical Multiplicity is “ripe” for work with a patient and understanding professional coach.

The coach can slowly and carefully build a trusting relationship with their Multiplist client, spending a considerable amount of time just listening to and reflect back on their client an appreciation for the “violation” that the client experiences in being jerked out of Dualism. As Perry has noted, the movement from Dualism to Multiplicity is attended by a profound grieving process. Innocence is lost. The coaching client has been kicked out of Eden and must now become self-critical and self-guiding. They can view and confront their cheating behavior in a new light. “It is understandable that you have been cheating given what is occurring in your world. However, there are other options that you can chose when facing these challenging conditions. Let’s explore several of them.” This can be a “teachable moment” and can help a client move forward in their own ethical (and intellectual development).

With some thoughtful, caring (but bounded) coaching, the Multiplist can begin to frame their ethical decisions in a Relativist framework. This framework is particularly of value for a client who is in a position of formal leadership in an organization and must make difficult decisions under prevailing VUCA-Plus conditions. The Executive Coach should be in the business of helping their client distinguish between organizational puzzles that have clear solutions and can be guided by a relatively simple code of conduct, and organizational problems and dilemmas that are multi-tiered and often filled with contradictions (Bergquist, 2019).

These challenging organizational issues are rarely covered by the organization’s code of conduct. They require recognition of multiple ethical frameworks and multiple pathways that can be taken that can be justified on moral grounds. The executive coach will be particularly valuable at this point. It is no longer “simply” a matter of not “cheating”—it is matter of now defining what is “cheating” and what is the nature and scope of cheating that has taken place (making use of the criteria we have enumerated in this essay).

This cheating might have been taking place by the leader or by other members of the organization. There might even be a growing realization that the cheating is systemic in this organization—and perhaps resides at the heart of this organization’s distinct culture. In all of these matters, the executive coach can help their client embrace a relativistic perspective in which there is appreciation for factors leading up to and sustaining the cheating, as well as for the many options that can be considered in seeking to reduce or eliminate the cheating.

William Perry once again encourages us to move forward in our ethical (and intellectual) development. It is not enough to recognize the multiple options of interpretation that might be engaged, as well as the multiple pathways that might be taken. Choices must be made regarding the most accurate and useful interpretation (knowing that a different point of view might be embraced at some point in the future and in some other setting). Furthermore, a decision must be made regarding the most appropriate pathway to take at this point in time and in this setting (knowing that a different choice might be made at a different time and in another setting).

With the assistance of their executive coach, the leader/client can move to Perry's fourth (and final) stage—which is Commitment in the Midst of Relativism. As in the case of a shift from Dualism to Relativism (through Multiplicity), there is a grieving process that accompanies the shift from Relativism to Commitment in Relativism. We “mourn” the loss of sideline status. To use a somewhat worn out sports metaphor, we must now enter the playing field and take all the hits if we are to reach the goal-line. Our coach can help us with both the playmaking and the recovery from bruising hits. At this level, the matter of cheating should no longer be primary. Rather, attention should focus in executive coaching sessions on the best ways in which to move forward in an ethical manner.

We must keep several things in mind with regard to our own ethical behavior as an executive coach (or any type of coach for that matter). First, we must remind ourselves that our own unethical behavior in some settings can creep into our coaching perspectives and practices. We must confront our own cheating if we are to be of assistance to a leader who is addressing the complex challenges of cheating and ethical behavior in an organizational setting—otherwise we are likely to have blurred vision regarding the challenges being faced and a biased attitude regarding which pathways should be taken.

Second, we must recognize the need for confidentiality in setting where cheating is being addressed. If they are to share their own concerns about cheating with us as their coach, then we must honor this trust by keeping our knowledge of the cheating to ourselves—that is unless the cheating can do harm to someone or if the cheating leads to a felony (in which case ethically – and sometimes legally – we are required to report the felonious cheating).

Third, while we are encouraging our client to explore alternative perspectives and practices, it is important that we do the same—especially if we chose to work with a coaching client who has been engaged in sustained and potentially destructive cheating. This is not a time to “go it alone.” We might wish to find someone with whom we can share our coaching experience (while preserving confidentiality). We all need a bit of supervision—regardless of the extent and diversity of our coaching experience. We also might want to make use of techniques and methods that other coaches (and organizational consultants) have found to be of value. We turn now to several of these “helpful hints.”

Techniques and methods for coaches and consultants

We offer two general approaches that we have found to be effective when working as a coach with someone who is cheating. We follow these suggestions with several strategies that can be engaged when assisting clients who wish to reduce or eliminate their cheating behavior.

Listen to stories: It is often easier for a consultant working on a large-scale project in an organization to identify embedded incidents of cheating or lying than a coach who may have a charter to work with an individual leader. For example, one of us [KW] worked on multiple projects with an international technology company. One of the techniques he used was to arrive at project meetings early, and socially interact with attendees when they arrived and waited for others (particularly the meeting leader) to arrive. Anecdotal stories told during these casual interactions provided great insight into how leaders, managers and team members think and behave (this technique is called organizational ethnography). These anecdotes need to be analyzed and documented to ensure that a one-off comment is not taken to be an organization-wide cultural phenomenon.

Identify specific cases: Unethical behavior is very difficult for senior leaders to recognize and accept as a culturally embedded phenomenon. Often, cheating is so common that leaders don't even consider the behavior as cheating. When a coach or consultant identifies cheating behavior, either systemically or at individual levels, it is vital for the coach/consultant to investigate as deeply as possible and document the behaviors as specifically as possible. We can't be vague and abstract if we are to be convincing.

So, what can we do about it? The answer to this differs greatly depending on the scope and nature of the cheating behavior. If the cheating is narrow in scope (an individual or small number of individuals), focused interventions may be appropriate. For example, in the "insider threat" situation described previously, disciplinary action may be appropriate including dismissal. In some case of outright fraud, legal and criminal action may be necessary.

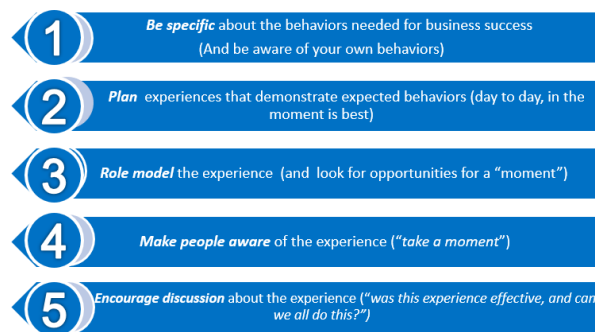
In severe cases of individual cheating behavior, senior leaders are likely to want to provide an example to other employees (at any level) that cheating will never be tolerated and take the harshest action possible. Perhaps in less severe cases, coaching of the "perpetrator" may be acceptable. However, it is incumbent on the coach/consultant to provide feedback to senior decision-makers on the optics of each decision option.

5-Steps to Behavior Change

In an organization/group-wide setting, behavior change can be difficult and difficult to sustain. A technique one of us [KW] has applied effectively is quite simple, but often difficult for leaders to implement – most often because they are embarrassed and awkward acknowledging that they (and their teams) need to change behavior. While difficult personalities and bad behavior tend to take up a lot of Human Resources time, there is a resistance to openly discussing the kinds of behaviors that are required for success, and those that lead to poor performance.

The most powerful (but difficult) aspect of this approach is that it needs to be implemented in a transparent and visible manner – everyone on the team or group needs to participate and to feel reasonably comfortable about discussing ongoing behavior. Also, this 5-step process should become a normal, everyday exercise that is implemented quickly and "in-the-moment" versus some kind of special event or periodic exercise. The 5-steps are as follows:

5 Steps in role-modeling new behaviors



Step 1 – the behaviors that the organization's leaders expect (related to ethical behavior) must be specific. These descriptions should be written down, clear and concise and with examples that clarify

what ethical behavior looks like and what unethical behavior looks like. There must be little opportunity for an individual to say “I did not think this was cheating”!

Step 2 – Senior leaders should suggest (and require) situations in which this technique should be applied. For example, initially using this process during meetings is a good starting point. Eventually, applying steps 3 to 5 can be used at any time and in-the-moment.

Step 3 – Leaders need to kick this process off by starting the role-modeling process. For example, on a project focused “insider threats” where (for example), copying confidential company files and documents and taking them home is considered theft (even if to simply do work at home), during a meeting a leader might suggest that she plans to work on a confidential document over the weekend.

Step 4 - After making this statement, she would “take a moment” and ask the team ... “what do you think about what I just said”? This brings awareness to the implied behavior.

Step 5 - Although brief, a conversation and debate should be encouraged that debates behaviors, policies and processes that manifest ethical behavior. Ultimately, once this step is common and less awkward, it can be applied in the moment and at any time both in response to cheating behavior and the opposite.

This simple process has been applied with organizations focused on “safety” in the workplace (especially in dangerous environments, such as electrical installations, welding operations or where there are fire hazards). I have also applied this technique in companies that want to become more “agile” and “nimble” but where these “values” have remained on posters and in corporate wide training and communications programs but have not actually caused behavior change. Once a simple exercise like this is implemented, it becomes a powerful coaching tool for coaches to leverage with their clients.

Behavioral Triggers

When a coach works with a leader who recognizes she is prone to lying or cheating, and does so impulsively and wants help to stop these behaviors, the process of “thinking about your thinking” can be a powerful technique. This psychological technique is more formally known as “metacognition”, which refers to the ability to reflect on one's own cognitive processes, such as attention, perception, memory, and feelings, and to monitor and regulate them for effectiveness – in this instance to limit compulsive cheating or lying.

In summary, the process of “thinking about my thinking” is applied using the following techniques:

- **Self-reflection:** Developing and applying a “trigger” when the compulsion to lie or cheat emerges. This will require some practice to be aware of one’s own feelings and compulsions. The trigger may be a simple self-reminder to “WAIT- Let me think about that!” before acting. Engaging in regular self-reflection on one's own thinking processes and feelings can be powerful, and particularly effective when applied “in-the-moment” when the compulsion to lie or cheat emerges.
- **Evaluation:** Regularly evaluating the effectiveness of one's thinking and emotions and making adjustments when they move one to lie or cheat.

- Seeking feedback: Seeking feedback from others to better understand one's own thinking processes and areas for improvement. This approach is fundamental the “5-Steps” described above.
- Developing metacognitive skills: Practicing metacognitive skills, such as paying attention to one's own thoughts and feelings and exploring them – “why am I feeling like this? Why do I feel compelled to lie in this situation, why do I feel this need ... and so on”.

Engaging the “Hard Stuff”

It's not just about the “Soft Stuff” (People, Behavior and Culture). It's also the “Hard Stuff” (Processes, Rules, Training and Policies) As the comedian Bill Murray quipped, "Why did the corporate executive cross the road? To get to the other side of the truth and hide their lies (tracks), of course!" In the corporate setting, it is important to make sure that employees cannot “cross the road” and hide their tracks. Ethical behavior needs to be embedded into the fabric of the company. Here are some ways to accomplish this:

- Spell It Out: As noted previously, ethical behavior cannot be flexible - make sure everyone knows the rules, and what happens if they bend them.
- Basic Ethics 101: Give employees a crash course in right and wrong, so they know what's acceptable and what's not (but, as noted previously, don't expect these kinds of training courses to make the difference in isolation).
- “Snitch” Hotline: Set up a system where employees can squeal on their co-workers anonymously, because who doesn't love a good tattletale? This hotline needs to be in context of the entire “insider threat” program to ensure that co-workers who “snitch” are not considered snitchers, but good Samaritans.
- No moaning: Let employees know that they can come forward without fear of retaliation, but there are rules about how to do this – frivolous moaning is not ok.
- Big Brother Is Watching: Make sure there are plenty of eyes on the prize to catch any sneaky behavior before it gets out of hand. Front line managers in particular can (and should) be aware what behaviors to look for which may suggest cheating and putting the company at risk.
- “Trust Falls” (But don't try this at home!): Encourage an atmosphere of open communication and honesty, where employees feel comfortable “falling” by being open with their viewpoints and providing feedback. An example of this open discussion is the 5-Steps process described above.
- “We The People”: Find out what employees are really thinking about with anonymous surveys and other confidential methods. Ethnographic methods (noted above) provide powerful insights given that they are “in-the-moment”, informal discussion amongst colleagues.

It is important to address cheating and lying in a prompt, fair, and consistent manner to maintain a positive organizational culture – perceptions of favoritism for example, can destroy an entire process for resisting cheating, lying and other forms of unethical behavior.

Conclusions

In exploring the nature and dynamics of cheating and purposeful lying we have come to one simple conclusion: Look for processes, procedures, rules and guidelines that either foster cheating or that embed the need for cheating—whether in one’s personal life (or the personal life of ones’ clients) or in the life of the organization with which one is working. At the persona level, we need to identify and work with cheating as it occurs during moments of stress and challenge. How do we reduce the stress and find other ways to address the challenge. We are unlikely to reduce the purposeful lying until we have remedied the need for this lying. Remember, cheating is hard to eliminate—there is always intermittent (periodic) reinforcement unless the underlying stress and challenge is addressed.

At the organizational level we find that behaviors from founders and senior leaders – which ultimately are seen as successful from a business (profit) perspective—become embedded in business processes and systems. We don’t reduce (let alone eliminate) cheating and purposeful lying until we confront (and potentially change) the underlying priorities. For example, the description of Wells Fargo Bank’s consumer fraud noted earlier was apparently based on top leadership requiring stringent sales targets and sales behavior, and then entrenching these expectations in sales processes, targets and bonuses.

On the contrary, while working with Chevron, one of us (KW) consulted on a culture change initiative to speed up decision-making on large-scale project approvals (most often with international governments). After detailed investigations, it became clear that the slow and cumbersome decision-making culture in Chevron was not simply risk-averse decision-making behaviors, but processes for projects approvals (as just one example) inhibited any attempt to change individual leader behaviors – the processes and systems also had to be streamlined.

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