

Deception lies in **DECEIT**

Many disasters have resulted from deception and self-delusion. **GEOFF WILLIAMS** reviews a book that analyses the personal dynamic of lying.

Large organisations need to strengthen control and audit discipline to avoid tendencies to self-deception — and the pressures to “group think” — from becoming excessive and leading to disaster.

This is a message put forward by Professor Charles Ford in *Lies! Lies! Lies! The Psychology of Deceit*.

The book includes anecdotes and reports of lying by employers, employees, advertisers and politicians. The message is clear — lying results in the diminishing of potentially useful communications.

Individuals tend to accept responsibility for desirable outcomes — and pass on responsibility for undesirable outcomes.

Ford says that, to some degree, self-deception is necessary for good mental health. However, increasing maturity may bring increasing consciousness of this self-deception and the desire to improve relationships with others.

A number of examples are quoted to illustrate the frequency of deceit in the animal world and its importance in the

survival of many species. Ford describes how people learn how to lie, defining a lie as “a deliberate intent to induce a false belief in another person”.

Of the experiments outlined, is one involving three-year-old children where it is observed that “those children who did lie demonstrated more smiling and relaxed faces than those who told the truth”.

As children develop, the concepts of social customs and “white lies” are introduced to them. A number of psychologists associate deception with compassion for others and learning to take a place in society.

Reasons are advanced on why people may lie. The conclusions are that, often, lying supports a sense of self-esteem, power and individuality. A significant finding is that “the most common lies are those we tell to ourselves”.

Other people may support this self-deception. Lying is often a reciprocal act: person A may readily accept a lie from

person B, if person A wants to believe the lie.

There are many styles of deception. Personality is important as each person is said to deceive and self-deceive in their own way. Lies are regarded as responses to both internal and external stress.

Examples of more pervasive forms of lying include:

- A partner in a prestigious law firm secretly seeing a psychiatrist.
- An Alabama judge convicted of bribery.
- An alcoholic sales manager who promises too much.
- A naval medical officer who claims success in operations, despite having no training.
- An air force officer with an outstanding war record — all fictitious.
- A charming lady treasurer of a church who embezzled \$1.2 million.

Everyday methods of detection are also reviewed, including technological methods.

A quoted study shows that the people most likely to lie perniciously appear to

have lower anxiety in social situations, and are the most difficult to detect.

Verbal and non-verbal clues are noted. A few individuals have an exceptional ability to detect lying and their successful detection rate may be as high as 80 to 90 per cent. On the other hand, many appear to unconsciously view lie detection as a liability rather than a skill.

Learning to detect deceit may have some success when the deceiver is well known to them, but not otherwise.

In the case of police, an independent study involving Dutch detectives found that the length of police work experience made no difference in their ability to separate truth and lies.

Paradoxically, it found that the more certain they were that they were right, the more likely they were to be wrong.

In another experiment, laymen were found to be better at detecting smugglers than Customs inspectors because of stereotyped beliefs held by the latter.

Another study, involving comparisons of different occupations, found that few (especially the US Secret Service) were successful in detection because they concentrated on non-verbal clues.

Unsuccessful lie detectors applied only to speech. Ford also reviews therapeutic approaches taken towards the deceitful person.

Psychotherapists encounter deceit on a daily basis. Selective memories, distortions and self-deceptions are mentioned as creating this misrepresentation, more often than overt lies.

Ford says treatment needs to be tailored to the individual. If the individual is in a defensive mode, non-confrontational techniques are preferable.

In other cases, groups such as AA may be helpful, combining confrontation with group support. The effects of deception are then examined. Many studies indicate that self-deception is correlated with self-esteem and mental health.

A bias towards taking responsibility for good results, and disassociation from the bad, is suggested as a natural method of maintaining self-esteem.

Depressed people may lack this bias, and actually see the world more realistically than non-depressed people.

Studies link a distortion of reality, in a mentally healthy person, with self-esteem, belief in personal efficacy and an optimistic view of the future.

It is cautioned that extreme self-illusions may have serious adverse consequences.

Examples include failing to prepare for catastrophes, failure to maintain good health or attempts at impossible tasks.

Ford maintains self-deception can be shared in groups. To quote Nietzsche: "Madness is the exception in individuals but the rule in groups". "Groupthink" is a phenomenon outlined by Dr Irving L. Janis and is attributed to a number of US foreign-policy fiascos.

In small groups it is characterised by illusions of invulnerability, discounting warnings, censorship of deviations and illusions of unanimity. It is also encouraged by a group leader's early declaration on

preferred decisions to be made and by isolation of the group from outside influences. Groupthink represents a dangerous form of self-deception by suspending an individual's critical faculties to meet group demands.

Evidently, there is a fine balance to be struck by a group in developing a team spirit, as against suppressing individual values of group members. Corporate auditors need to appraise this balance in deciding whether they can rely upon executive assurances.

In conclusion, Ford reminds his readers that deception is easier to achieve than detect. Most business professionals are believed to be honest, with the dishonest minority avoided but not often punished.

A healthy person is able to keep self-illusions within reasonable bounds. A depressed person is regarded as less able to use normal self-deception mechanisms.

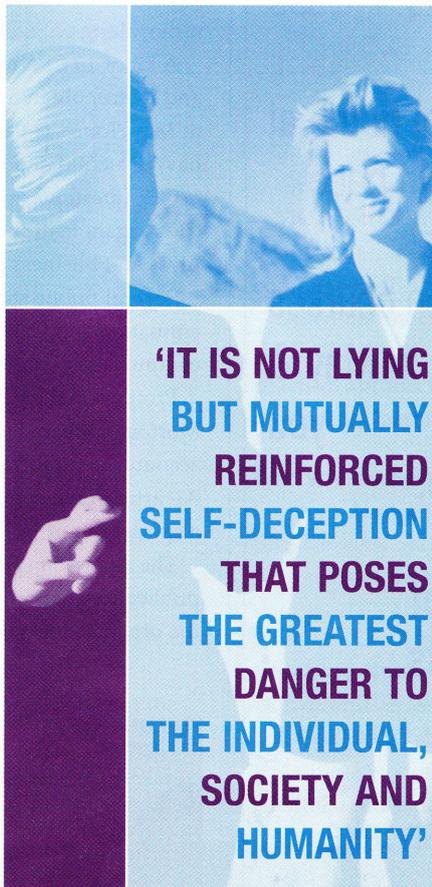
Therefore, one can draw a correlation between being seen as a persuasive and good performer, and a reasonable level of self-deception, as Ford argues self-deception may be promoted by lies to other people. Such lies are more likely to concern unfavourable information, rather than favourable information.

Corporations and other organisations expect truth from their employees, but don't willingly reciprocate.

According to Ford, lying and self-deception is a normal part of interpersonal relationships. Deceit is prevalent in the animal kingdom and every child is taught to lie. To quote Ford: "In the final analysis, it is not lying but mutually reinforced self-deception that poses the greatest danger to the individual, society and humanity." ■

GEOFF WILLIAMS, CPA, IS A SOLE PRACTITIONER WITH GLW ANALYSIS SERVICES IN MELBOURNE.

Lies! Lies! Lies! The Psychology of Deceit by Professor Charles V. Ford, Department of Psychiatry and Behavioural Neurobiology, School of Medicine, University of Alabama; published by the American Psychiatric Association Inc., 1996.



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