CHAPTER FOUR

LETTING GO OF LIES

MY WIFE WAS ABLE to attend one of my presentations when she was pregnant with our son. It was a local engagement and she and I both knew a few people in the audience. At the conclusion of the session, one of the audience members raised her hand, looked back at my wife, returned her gaze to me, and said, "Your poor child won't ever be able to lie to you," which drew a fair amount of laughter from the crowd. I waited for the laughter to die down and replied, "I believe you have this all wrong." She paused in shock as I continued, "Children are going to lie. They always have and they always will. Nothing I can say to my son will stop him from lying." After the woman in the audience nodded her head in agreement, I said, "My wife and I have a bigger challenge. If we constantly catch our son lying, he isn't going to stop lying. He is going to hone his skills until he becomes much more proficient in his craft. Our challenge isn't to catch our son lying, it is to raise him with our moral and ethical values while not raising the world's greatest liar." The audience found my explanation humorous, and absolutely true.

OUR LYING BONES

The concept of lying likely precedes spoken language. We start lying early and many of us may be at our lying-best when we are young. Vasudevi Reddy heads the Department of Psychology at the University of Portsmouth. Her research suggests infants learn to deceive their parents before they learn how to speak.[1] The research also challenges the traditional view that children begin lying between the ages of two and four years old, which coincides with the development of their theory of mind (their ability to begin understanding the emotions, ideas, and perspectives of other people). Common lies from toddlers include denying doing something wrong, blaming someone else, making an excuse for their actions, falsely claiming to have completed a task, and falsely claiming to have permission to do something.[2]

Let's also not overlook that as parents, one of our most important jobs is to teach our children how to tell polite social lies. Kang Lee, a psychologist at the University of Toronto, sees the emergence of this behavior in toddlers as a reassuring sign that their cognitive growth is on track.[3] I celebrated my son's first lie. As part of our morning routine, he and I usually had breakfast together. One morning, at barely two and a half years old, he decided he wanted to eat his breakfast in the living room while watching television, something he wasn't allowed to do. On this particular morning, my wife walked into the kitchen and he immediately looked up at her, picked up his plate, and said, "Mommy, Daddy told me I could take my muffins into the living room." Then, he got up and walked into the living room. My wife looked at me stunned, and I laughed uncontrollably. Honestly, I was happy he had developed to the point where he learned he could manipulate the situation to his advantage, and I gladly allowed him to eat his muffins in the living room that morning. We recognized the developmental milestone, let him have the win, and corrected his

behavior the next morning. The lie was so innocent (and so very entertaining) that there was no need to risk harming the future of our open communication by calling him on it in the moment.

Despite the fact that we've all been lying since we were in diapers, people are often obsessed with identifying and eradicating dishonesty. People are convinced that if they can just catch anyone in the act of lying, they will be at an advantage. The truth, ironically, is that is often not the case.

HISTORY OF THE HUNT

Focusing on catching people lying creates unhealthy emotions that are typically driven by our need to protect our self-image and maintain our superior moral and ethical beliefs. Humans have been fascinated with catching people lying and obtaining the truth for thousands of years. While the allure of catching people lying has no doubt led to crimes being solved, wars being thwarted, and con artists exposed, it has also resulted in innocent people being imprisoned and executed, ruined relationships, and the creation of unhealthy myths. A look back at the progression of deception detecting techniques quickly exposes both the motivations behind, and the risks associated with, these efforts.

Humans' attempts at deception detection range from comedic, to tragic, to well-intentioned, to scientific. One of the earliest lie detector tests, dating back to 1000 BCE China, is the rice test.[4] Suspects would have their mouths filled with dry rice and then asked to spit it out. The thinking was that an innocent person would be able to generate the saliva necessary to make the rice moist and sticky. However, a guilty person would not be able to produce saliva and the rice would be spit out dry. They reasoned innocent people would not be nervous enough to stop producing

saliva as well—despite being detained and held against their will, which is honestly a good enough reason for dry mouth.

Another early deception detecting technique involved equine participation, and dates back to approximately 500 BCE India.[5] The suspects were told that a sacred donkey possessed the power to determine suspects' innocence or guilt based on how they pulled the donkey's tail. One by one, the suspects were asked to enter the tent and pull the donkey's tail. What the suspects didn't know was that the donkey's tail had been covered in soot; the theory was that innocent people would pull the donkey's tail without hesitation and exit with soot on their hands. Guilty subjects who were convinced of the donkey's mystic powers would enter the tent and return with clean hands, as they were too scared to pull the donkey's tail and risk exposing their guilt. I'm assuming these ancient investigators had methods for ensuring that word of this ploy wouldn't spread throughout their population.

The Roman Empire had the "Mouth of Truth."[6] It was a large marble carving of a disc-shaped mouth and face. Allegedly, when people touched it, it had the power to tell the difference between who was honest and who was dishonest.

Deception detecting techniques took a turn for the worse as the centuries wore on. People were forced to retrieve rocks from vats of boiling water, carry hot irons or walk over hot coals, suffer through flames, eat terrible things, get thrown off cliffs, and submitted to other unconscionable acts. The thought process at the time was that the prosecutor's God of choice would spare innocent people death and/or significant injury. However, the guilty would either die, or worse, suffer gruesome injury and subsequent punishment. Historians will never be able to accurately chronicle all the innocent people who suffered and died during these times.

Cesare Lombrosso created what many consider to be the first modern deception detecting device in 1881.[7] He was a

criminologist and physician and was motivated to measure changes in peoples' blood pressure while they were answering questions. Lombrosso's Glove, as it was called, took blood pressure measurements and printed them on a chart for evaluation. Dr. William Marston built on Dr. Lombrosso's work and completed a device in 1921 that was capable of measuring changes in suspects' blood pressure and breath rates. These early machines quickly evolved to become what we currently refer to as the polygraph machine. John Larson and Leonard Keele are often credited with designing the first polygraph machine which they referred to as the "Cardio-Pneumo Psychograph." This machine simultaneously measured changes in a suspect's respiratory rate, blood pressure, and galvanic skin changes. Continued technological advances have improved the kind and number of measurements these machines are capable of making.

While technological advances have improved the ability of polygraph machines to detect changes in suspects' autonomic nervous systems, they aren't able to pinpoint the reason for these changes with complete accuracy. Additionally, some examiners do a terrific job, while others struggle and impact or incorrectly interpret results. In consequence, the Employee Polygraph Protection Act became law in 1988 and bans most private sector organizations in the United States from requiring their employees to take a polygraph exam as either a pre-employment requirement or during their employment.[8] Furthermore, polygraph exam results are rarely admissible in court proceedings in the United States.

These legal precedents don't erase the fact the polygraph machines, and skilled polygraphers, are effective tools in certain contexts. In fact, the polygraph machine initiated a cottage industry. Numerous companies have dedicated themselves to building the perfect lie detection device. Inventions include voice stress analyzers, eye scanning machines, touch screens that measure the

pulses in people's thumbs, and deception detecting robots. Perhaps the most accurate device is an fMRI machine that can track the changes in a person's brain function while they are connected. Other techniques that have been utilized in truth-seeking are narcoanalysis (truth serum drugs), hypnosis, and statement analysis.

THE HUMAN TOUCH

Even with all the available technology, nothing replaces a well-trained investigator who possesses a high level of situational awareness and arrives with a toolbox full of inquiry techniques. Over the last fifty-plus years, some of the most notorious techniques have been referred to as "the third-degree" and "enhanced interrogation techniques."

In reality, these techniques usually are not used in actual interrogations. These were often methods that interrogators used to reduce their suspects' resistance prior to interrogating them (asking them questions). These techniques, along with other confrontational-style interrogation techniques, are also more likely to elicit false confessions because they motivate people to say whatever is necessary to make the discomfort go away, not to tell the truth.

People are often surprised by what others tell them when they are respectful of each other.

The best interrogators enter into their conversations focused on obtaining the truth, not obtaining a confession or catching their suspects lying. The most successful leaders and sales professionals approach their conversations the same way and prioritize problem solving over assigning blame. Thankfully, the research over the last twenty-plus years has consistently shown that, in most contexts, rapport-based interrogation techniques are the

most effective. People are often surprised by what others tell them when they are respectful of each other. Non-confrontational interrogation techniques including the Wicklander-Zulawski Method, the Cognitive Interview, the Strategic Use of Evidence approach, the PEACE model, and others, all demonstrate the effectiveness of rapport-based strategies. As a general rule, it doesn't pay to act like a jerk when you need someone to share sensitive information with you.

LIE TO SURVIVE

Our collective obsession with detecting deception underscores a potentially uncomfortable fact—deception is a necessary component of our daily lives. Without lying, our pre-human ancestors may not have lived long enough for human beings to evolve into the species we know today. According to an oft-cited research study led by Bella DePaulo, adults tell an average of one to two lies a day.[9] Curtis Honts, a former polygrapher and professor at Boise State, is quoted as saying that adults lie in roughly 25 percent of their daily conversations. Robert Feldman, a psychologist at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst, found that 60 percent of the participants in his study couldn't complete a ten-minute conversation without lying.[10] Jerald Jellison, a former professor at the University of Southern California, suggests adults may hear as many as two hundred lies a day.[11] To make matters worse, the widely traditional research-based belief is that we have roughly a 54 percent chance at accurately detecting deception in our conversations.

As always, understanding the potential application of these statistics requires more context. First, let's define lying and deception to set the standard for our examination. Tim Levine defines

deception as intentionally, knowingly, or purposely misleading another person. He defines lying as a subtype of deception that involves stating outright falsehoods that are not signaled as false to the receiver.[12]

Lies can be separated into two general categories: pro-social and self-serving. Pro-social lies are told with the intention of benefiting others. They include altruistic lies, which serve to benefit the receiver at the cost of the liar, and white lies, which are typically trivial. Believe it or not, multiple research studies have demonstrated that pro-social lies actually increase trust because people often value benevolence over honesty in many situations.[13] Self-serving lies are the lies that upset people the most. These lies are most often told to benefit the liar, usually at the cost of the receiver.

Let's pause to consider the fact that we all have lied, we all love and trust people who have lied to us, and we all likely work with people who have lied to us. Which leads me to the following question: If we are all liars who love and work with liars, why are we so obsessed with catching people lying?

UNDERSTANDING WHY

In the majority of contexts, knowing that someone lied is inconsequential. It will likely only serve to upset you, lead to judgment, and distract you from the greater goals of the conversation. Understanding why and how they lied can help you work your way to the truth.

In Pamela Meyer's book *Lie Spotting*, she outlines four offensive and five defensive motives as to why people lie.[14]

- Obtain a reward
- Gain an advantage

- Create a positive impression
- Exercise power

- Avoid punishment or embarrassment
- Protect someone else from punishment
- Protect yourself or someone else from harm
- Remove yourself from an awkward situation
- Maintain privacy

Timothy Levine from the University of Alabama at Birmingham also identifies ten reasons why people may lie:[15]

1. To cover up a personal transgression
2. Gain an economic advantage
3. Gain a nonmonetary advantage
4. Remain polite
5. For altruistic motives
6. Self-impression management
7. Malice or intent to harm others
8. Humor
9. Avoidance
10. They are pathological liars

Both of these lists are thorough and well-researched. And, in my opinion, they both stop one step short. More often than not, adults lie for one reason—to avoid a real or perceived consequence. Knowing someone lied is rarely important. Focusing on lies is like treating the symptom instead of the disease. What is paramount is understanding what they were hoping to gain or avoid by manipulating the truth, in the context of the situation.

Timothy Levine's research on deception is both thorough and exhaustive. His results are clear. The vast majority of the time, people lie to protect themselves (or someone else). They do not lie to hurt you.[16] Yet despite this fact, people often become furious, disappointed, and offended when they believe they are being lied to. Several years ago, I received a call from one of my CEO clients who literally started the conversation by saying, "I know you told me not to get mad, but I'm pissed that my CFO just lied to me." The CFO's lie didn't make this CEO mad, the CEO's emotional attachment to getting lied to made him mad. Being lied to violated his self-image and moral code, which in turn made him mad at his CFO and completely derailed any opportunity to turn the conversation toward a productive resolution.

The vast majority of the time, people lie to protect themselves (or someone else). They do not lie to hurt you.

AVOIDING OUR PROBLEMS

According to Levine, lying is the result of a simple decision. People normally default to telling the truth until the truth becomes problematic. Once the truth appears counterproductive to achieving their goals, people deviate from the truth. Once the threat has passed, they return to the truth.[17] That's it.

Most of the time, people lie because they believe (rightfully or not) that it is their best available option at the time. Dan Ariely's research confirms that we are all capable of deception to the degree that we can justify it within our self-image.[18] His research found that, to some degree, we all want to benefit from cheating, and we all want to simultaneously be seen as good people. We can justify our dishonesty based on any combination of the goals we want to

achieve, the consequences we are looking to avoid, the people we are communicating with, and the context of the situation. Leaders in all contexts will be well served to remember that when they treat people unfairly, force compliance, have inconsistent standards, and win at the expense of others, they make it much easier for people to justify dishonest actions.

COMMON LIES

When the truth is problematic, and justifications for lying are easy to find, we can expect our counterparts to manipulate the truth. This isn't necessarily malicious or immoral. It is human nature. In fact, there are five ways people can lie during conversations.[19] First, they can deny doing something they actually did. Second, they can intentionally omit information they believe is counterproductive to achieving their goals. Third, they can fabricate a completely untrue story. Fourth, they can exaggerate a story. And fifth, they can minimize details they believe may be problematic. Believe it or not, fabricating stories, or telling bold-faced lies, is the least common method for lying. Most liars prefer to keep as much of the truth as possible in their lies. This reduces the stress levels associated with their deceptions, helps them quickly recall information when they are creating their lies, increases the believability of their lies, and it makes it easier for them to recall their lies at a later time.

Some liars are so skilled it can be extremely difficult to catch them in the act. Creative thinkers have a significant advantage navigating problematic moments in their conversations by facilitating the self-serving justification process. Francesca Gino and Dan Ariely found that people who are skilled at divergent thinking and possess high levels of cognitive flexibility are adept at solving

difficult problems that require multi-faceted solutions.[20] His work asserts that divergent thinking likely helps people develop ways to bypass moral rules, and cognitive flexibility likely helps people reinterpret information in self-serving ways.

COMMON LIARS

Beyond our creative levels, many of the most successful liars have several traits in common. Albert Vrij identified eighteen traits that good liars possess.[21] The highlights of this list include acting skills, confidence, experience lying, a good memory, rapid and original thinking, and the ability to use emotional camouflage. Lies can be very hard to identify when they are delivered by liars who possess these skills—especially when we are unprepared, distracted, and focusing on the wrong cues. The impact of these skills is significant; no matter what you may have been told in the past, there is no single behavior that consistently indicates truth or deception. It doesn't exist. There is an infinite combination of behaviors that may betray someone's dishonest intentions and these behaviors can change based on the liar, the lie, the recipient of the lie, and the environment the lie is occurring in. It is also critical to reiterate that truthful people often exhibit many of the behaviors commonly associated with liars.

There is no single behavior that consistently indicates truth or deception.

Just because someone looks stressed or nervous doesn't mean they are lying, and just because someone looks comfortable or consistent doesn't mean they are telling the truth. Consider the fact that people aren't usually aware that their counterpart may have motivation to lie to them and they haven't taken the time to identify ground truth (i.e., evidence or other relevant facts) prior

to the conversation, and you can see that trying to catch people lying is often a fool's errand.

However, there is good news as well. Since most lies are told to protect liars, not hurt receivers, Timothy Levine's research has found that most lies are told by a few prolific liars.[22] His work found that while many people may lie occasionally, or even rarely, very few people lie often. He also found that the ubiquitous 54 percent accuracy statistic is a result of how the research was conducted, and that some people are terrible liars and easier to identify. It is important to note that recognizing these transparent liars can create a false confidence in observers. In subsequent studies, he demonstrated several important improvements. First, he demonstrated that when communications are truthful, an observer's identification of honest communication skyrockets. Nine of his studies produced an accuracy rate of identifying honest communication over 75 percent of the time, with one study recording accuracy as high as 96 percent.[23]

SEEING THE TRUTH

The good news is, we generally do a great job recognizing the truth when the truth is being communicated. On the flip side, Levine has demonstrated significant statistical improvement on deception detection accuracy as well. First, it is critical to note that his team discovered that 80 percent of lies were identified with the involvement of some sort of evidence.[24] In real life, most lies are discovered after the fact, with the addition of new evidence or added contextual awareness. This fact is sometimes clouded when, in hindsight, we believe we identified the lies in real time.

Levine's team shattered the previous statistical expectation when they were able to replicate deception detection accuracy

results with over 90 percent accuracy with both college students (94%) and trained experts (96%).[25] He found five key factors that increased their ability to accurately detect deception at such a high rate.[26] First was their ability to establish ground truth and evaluate the following communication against this ground truth. Second, leveraging their situational familiarity to assess the plausibility of explanations they receive. Third was considering their counterparts' potential motivations to deceive them based on their situational familiarity. Fourth, asking strategic questions that elicit diagnostically valuable answers. And fifth, harnessing the ability to persuade their counterparts to tell the truth. Dr. David Matsumoto and Dr. Edward Geiselman have also led teams that produced research which confirmed that training can increase observers' abilities to determine when they are being misled.[27, 28]

These keys outline a playbook for you anytime you engage in critical conversations where identifying truthful and deceptive responses is important to you. All of these keys will be addressed in detail throughout this book—but not for catching lies. The Disciplined Listening Method is not an interrogation technique, and it is not a lie-catching technique. Disciplined Listeners observe for opportunities to maximize the value of their conversations and relationships. Lie-catching mentalities typically reinforce confirmation biases, limit opportunities to generate unexpected value, create competitive situations, and damage relationships.

Disciplined Listeners observe for opportunities to maximize the value of their conversations and relationships.

EXCHANGING LIES FOR WHYS

If you are committed to gaining more value from your critical conversations, stop trying to catch people lying. As we illustrated in chapter 3, many lie-catching efforts are fueled by unfortunate myths and incorrect stereotypes. Even if you guess correctly, knowing someone lied to you is information with limited value. Start observing for contextually relevant indications of comfort and discomfort. The behavioral shifts we observe during conversations do not indicate that our counterparts are lying or telling the truth. They are indications that our counterparts are experiencing emotional shifts and their comfort levels are either increasing or decreasing. Correctly determining why your counterpart's comfort levels change within the context of your conversation produces tremendously valuable intelligence. Understanding why their emotions are changing allows you to immediately adapt your approach to take advantage of their shifting feelings.

Applying Levine's five keys will increase your ability to protect yourself, achieve your goals, and maximize the value of your conversations by accurately determining why your counterparts' emotions are changing. First, understand when you are engaging in an interaction where someone may be motivated to mislead you. Prior to these engagements, complete as much due diligence as possible to increase your situational familiarity and establish ground truth (or something close to it). During these interactions, evaluate everything you see and hear within the context of the situation, ask powerful questions to elicit diagnostically valuable information, and persuade people to be honest with you.

If you take anything from this chapter, take this—it is okay to be lied to. People lie to us when they feel like it's their last good choice, and we do it too. The lies we receive often also include the hidden codes we need to unlock the truth if we observe carefully

It is okay to be lied to.

enough to identify them. Stop trying to catch people lying. It typically isn't healthy or helpful. Observe for indications of discomfort and capitalize on your counterparts' current fears and motivations.

Now that we have covered the most common mistakes observers fall prey to, and the importance of graduating beyond catching lies, we are going to start exploring how we can improve our situational awareness in preparation for executing the Disciplined Listening Method.