



THE BUSINESS ETHICS FIELD GUIDE

Challenge 8: Dissemblance

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This series features 13 articles from Brad Agle, Aaron Miller and Bill O'Rourke, co-authors of The Business Ethics Field Guide. Each article focuses on a common work dilemma, while providing real life examples and insightful solutions. For more information, please refer to the cover story in the November/December 2018 issue.

Dissemblance is the act of hiding something such as the whole truth or your real intentions. In life we are sometimes tempted to misrepresent or conceal the truth in order to craft a better outcome for ourselves. This category is not named "dishonesty" because we all know that cheating and stealing is definitely wrong. Dissemblance, on the other hand, doesn't involve an overt lie. Instead, it is refraining from telling the whole truth.



Sometimes the wrong question is asked. For example, when asked if you have filed for bankruptcy, would “no” really be the right answer if you plan to file the bankruptcy papers tomorrow? Other times, silence is a form of dissemblance. If the other party in a negotiation starts to speak among themselves in their native language, should you notify them that you understand that language?

Why Conceal?

The most common reason that people dissemble is that they get a benefit—often a personal pecuniary benefit. When speaking to high school students, I give this example: Your parents ask you to take your nephew to the amusement park on his 5th birthday. They give you \$50 for your admission and \$50 for your nephew’s admission. As you approach the entrance, the sign says, “Admission \$50; Under 5 yrs - FREE.” How old is your nephew? Telling the truth does not cost you \$50 because you were given the money for admission tickets. By lying, you can pocket \$50. Those are the rules. A sharp student once told me that he would call his aunt and uncle and ask what time his nephew was born.

As a follow-up for the students who admitted that they would lie and say their nephew was under 5 years old, I ask what their parents would say when told that their child lied and kept the \$50. I ask if the parents would praise them or reprimand them? It is important to think about our actions and how our examples teach others, both good and bad. I suggest that we not sell our integrity or teach others that dissemblance is okay, and surely not for \$50.

Dissemblance in the Workplace

We have similar situations in our business. Do we follow the rules or look for ways to bend those rules? Do our employees watch as we take steps to adhere to the rules and their intent or to deceive/cheat others? What do our employees learn from their observations of our behavior?

13 ETHICAL DILEMMAS

Upcoming articles in this series will take a closer look at each dilemma.

- 1 **STANDING UP TO POWER**
Someone in power is asking you to do something unethical.
- 2 **MADE A PROMISE**
Conflicting commitments force you to choose.
- 3 **INTERVENTION**
You see something wrong. How do you proceed?
- 4 **CONFLICTS OF INTEREST**
Multiple roles put you at cross purposes.
- 5 **SUSPICIONS WITHOUT ENOUGH EVIDENCE**
You believe something is going on, but you’re not sure.
- 6 **PLAYING DIRTY**
Achieving justice but by doing something unethical.
- 7 **SKIRTING THE RULES**
Bending a rule for a better outcome.
- 8 **DISSEMBLANCE**
Misrepresenting the truth for better outcome.
- 9 **LOYALTY**
Giving up ethical stance to protect valued relationship.
- 10 **SACRIFICING PERSONAL VALUES**
Living ethically might put burden on others.
- 11 **UNFAIR ADVANTAGE**
When opportunity exists to wield an unfair upper hand.
- 12 **REPAIR**
When you are responsible for a mistake.
- 13 **SHOWING MERCY**
You could grant forgiveness, but you don’t know if you should.

Some business negotiations, such as a negotiation with a landowner, can be stressful situations. That stress does not justify dissemblance. As tempting as it may be to mislead the landowner, it is not right. In fact, if that landowner has a misunderstanding, even if not caused by you, do you still have an obligation to correct the situation? I suggest that you do have that obligation. In these situations, a primary objective is to create long term trust with the landowner. Trust comes from a strong foundation built on truth—the whole truth.

Exceptions and Pitfalls

Sometimes obligations (such as an obligation of confidentiality) prevent us from telling the whole truth. Not disclosing another person’s medical condition, for example, would seem to be prudent and for their benefit. In such instances, refraining from disclosing the confidential information is driven by proper motivation, not a sinister or selfish motive. That is not dissemblance.

There are a number of pitfalls to avoid in this dilemma:

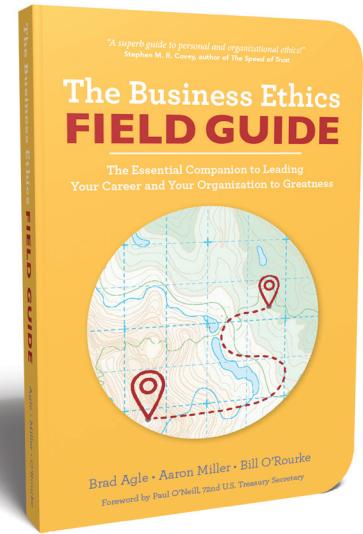
- **Ruining Your Reputation**
Few ethical issues will stay with you more than being caught in a lie. And the best way to earn a reputation for character and integrity is to be known as a person who is totally honest.
- **Making Assumptions**
Don’t assume that your silence isn’t dissemblance. If there is a misunderstanding, you need to speak-up and correct it. Don’t assume that others will misuse the information; trust them.
- **Letting Pressure Get to You**
Avoid the temptation to lie in pressure situations, especially when the recipient doesn’t have the time or the opportunity to verify the information. Experience demonstrates that telling lies, even small ones, will be regretted.

- **Thinking You Can Lie Just Once**
Lies breed lies. Dissemblance is rarely a one-time event. People usually need more information than one answer can give and the first lie might necessitate more lies. Avoid beginning to create such deceptions.
- **Avoiding Coming Clean**
If you have deceived others, don’t discount the value of coming clean. We are far more forgiving of those who confess their dishonesty than of those who get caught in the deception.

A common annual exercise in most organizations is the preparation and approval of next year’s budget. This exercise usually begins with a general directive such as “cut 5 percent.” Then the “bluffing” begins. The first step of the crafty budget manager is to select a very favorable baseline that makes a 5 percent cut much easier. The baseline might be last year’s budget, last year’s actual expenses, this year’s actual expenses annualized or even a five-year average. The next step is to obfuscate or bury revenues and expenses in an effort to arrive at the most favorable and easiest to achieve budget. In an organization where trust among managers and bosses is paramount, such a budgeting process is built on a foundation of mistrust and misinformation. A further problem is that both sides expect the game playing to occur.

The Benefits of Honesty

Early in my career I decided not to play the budget game. In presenting my budgets to my boss, I put all my cards on the table. I showed all the possible baselines and explained why I selected one as the most accurately representative. From there I followed the guideline (cut 5 percent), and then told my boss where there was still some “fat” in the budget by account and amount, but asked him not to take it unless he really needed it.



That openness and honesty was refreshing to my boss. I know he appreciated my coming clean with all the numbers rather than the normal inquisition process in which the boss searched to find what was being hidden. Often my budget would be approved quickly and without arguments, name calling or worse. This reinforced to me the importance of building trust through upmost honesty.

Honesty—complete, open, unqualified honesty—is indeed the best policy. ✪



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