

# Getting the Job Done: Strategies for Communicating Honestly in the Workplace

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**Larry Johnson**

Synopsis by Rod Cox

It's hard to envision a company or leader that purposely embraces unethical and untruthful behavior as a strategic plan and operational practice. Yet any one of us can name a number of high-profile individuals (political and world leaders, sports figures) and cultures (Enron, Arthur Anderson, Tyco) that have fallen because of a propensity for tolerating passive truths – for not telling the truth when it needed to be told.

*"For most companies, the problem is not whether to practice truthfulness and accountability. It's how to integrate such practices into the culture so that they are rewarded, self-perpetuating, and virtually automatic. Straightforward, honest, no-nonsense communication can be rare in an era of 'win-win' theories and corporate cultures focused on consensus. Whether it's fear of reprisal, the tendency to just 'go along' or not wanting to hurt someone's feelings, many of us avoid telling the truth when the truth needs to be told."*

Many otherwise ethical companies and leaders practice a one-sided view – *"a Kumbaya Syndrome that embraces all decisions, no matter how stupid or unethical"* where the mantra is to smile and sing the company song. Larry Johnson and Bob Phillips, authors of **Absolute Honesty** contend that this is bad for relationships, bad for business growth, and bad for profitability. In this presentation, they provide a blueprint for creating and sustaining a business environment of open communication and healthy debate *"that respects honesty instead of demeaning it."*

The goal is an ethical infrastructure. Laid out as The Six Laws of Absolute Honesty, the authors show that *"honesty does pay and that creating a culture of straight talk and integrity not only keeps the media at bay but also makes an organization more competitive in the global economy and better trusted by customers, employees, and shareholders. To do this, we attack the sort of passivity at both the personal and organizational levels that allows little lies to grow into giant disasters."*

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**Larry Johnson** is a Certified Speaking Professional whose clients include Lloyd's of London, American Express, McDonalds, AMA, Harley-Davidson, and Nordstrom. To date, he has addressed over 2000 audiences throughout the world. Larry lives in Phoenix, Arizona. **Absolute Honesty** is the product of his long professional friendship with **Bob Phillips** who co-authored the book. Bob, whose home is in Bend, Oregon, has been a leading Human Resource leader for over 30 years including senior positions at Intel, Tektronix and Thomson Multimedia.

Both authors attended this Executive Forum presentation. The concepts, insights and quotes in this synopsis are from that presentation, from the ensuing speakers' luncheon, and from their insightful, example-rich book.

**Absolute Honesty:** ISBN-10:0-8144-0781-1 and ISBN-13: 978-0-8144-0781-3.

**“T**he seeds of (ethical) passivity were sown, ironically, in the 1980s, when companies across the nation rushed to embrace a management model that focused on the benefits of teamwork and its ability to empower organizations. In general, this approach resulted in tremendous increases in productivity and improved employee morale – so we are firm supporters. That said, many organizational cultures built on the team/empowerment model have often preached a subtle (and sometimes not-so-subtle) mantra that says, ‘For the company to function as one big happy team, we all must be ‘nice’ to each other.’ ”

*But being ‘nice’ often translates into being cooperative rather than confrontational, going along to get along, accepting less than stellar results when accountability is called for, or simply not telling the truth when doing so would be either politically inconvenient or professional suicide.”*

There is a critical need for a higher level of honesty in organizations today. Admittedly a difficult and risky venture, it nevertheless plays out in the form of creating cultures of integrity, establishing compelling brands, increasing competitive advantages and productive workforces, supporting consistent leadership, augmenting profitability, and beefing up morale.

*“While there are many reasons why one company thrives and another struggles, we believe absolute honesty is essential to the health and well-being of the people who make a company successful. Absolute honesty improves morale and supports a productive workforce. It promotes ethical behavior within a culture of integrity. It communicates the right message to customers and shareholders, enhancing the brand and building competitive advantage.”*

## **Law # 1: Tell the Truth**

***“Too often, ‘telling it like it is’ amounts to professional suicide. In the long run, however, there is no other way to earn the trust of employees, customers, and shareholders.”***

*“As our parents and teachers told us, the worst truth is better than the best lie. That doesn’t mean that telling the truth is easy or won’t have negative consequences. It simply means that when faced with a choice of telling the truth, postponing its telling, or lying, we think telling the truth is the best choice.”*

**You create trust.** If you are always straight with people, they learn to trust you. No one is ever taken by surprise. They can depend on you to treat them truthfully and honorably.

**You do the right thing.** This does not mean that it is always easy, or that it automatically produces better results. Sometimes telling the truth has repercussions, especially when we might offend someone, say something someone doesn’t want to hear, or incur negative consequences.

**You discover it’s rarely as painful as you think.** Often we catastrophise the consequences of telling the truth. We imagine the worst possible scenarios. And sometimes we never get around to telling the truth at all. But nearly always, we discover that our fears are out of proportion.

**You pay a higher price for lying.** Lying nearly always raises the stakes and makes the situation worse. *“It not only impeaches our credibility, but it insults those to whom we lied.”* In countless business and political situations, *“leaders who choose honesty limit the damage to themselves and their organizations.”*

**You get it behind you.** *“If you want to know the truth, you must be willing to seek out and listen to truths you may not want to hear.”* This requires a willingness to address situations quickly and honestly; i.e. real-time honesty.

**You keep things simple.** Simply stated, it’s easier to remember the truth than to remember a lie. *“Abraham Lincoln once said, no man has a good enough memory to be a successful liar.”* You also free yourself from the worry of being caught in a lie.

**You avoid damaging relationships.** *“You discover that the discomfort of being honest is rarely as unpleasant as the pain caused by deceit.”*

Sounds simple enough. But there are formidable barriers that make consistently telling the truth difficult. Johnson and Phillips have identified eight of them.

**Fear of retribution.** This is based on reality. But Johnson and Phillips argue that the risk is worth it. At the very least, you can make sure that you never practice retribution yourself.

**Fear of hurting other people’s feelings.** Sometimes the truth truly does hurt, but you can do it in a way that minimizes the hurt and reduces collateral damage. There are also times when the truth is none of our business so the key is to *“tell the truth when we have good reason to tell it, and when it is our business to do so.”* And yes, there are times when a white lie is the better option. (“You look beautiful in that dress.”) But before doing so, consider: what are the criteria in a situation where it could be costly? Is there a moral issue? Is there a bigger reason to consider? Making a mistake in this sensitive environment can have a very negative impact if you blow it. When your employees perceive that you will lie about one situation, they will have a hard time believing that you won’t lie about another. In fact, they’re apt to kill you professionally. Johnson tells of nursing home employees who – when they found out that their boss was overworking them by underutilizing nursing temps (a higher cost option) so that he could qualify for an incentive trip to Hawaii – pointed out operational discrepancies to the inspectors and had the place closed down.

**Fear of change.** *“Speaking the truth often means admitting that what worked before is now obsolete – and that’s a scary thought.”* Can you think of a company that went out of business (or is currently in danger of going out of business) because its leaders refused to abandon what had been successful before? *“To be candid and truthful we have to be willing to embrace the changes that will occur when we speak the truth.”*

**Fear of being disliked.** It’s healthy to want to be liked; it helps us get things done. But when it gravitates to what Johnson and Phillips call the Kumbaya Syndrome – likeability before honesty – we forfeit operational vitality for compatibility.

**Fear of losing support.** A less truth-invested boss may withhold support from an uppy direct report.

**Fear of paying the price.** *“M. Scott Peck makes the point that people are seldom born evil or become so all at once. More often it is a gradual journey where one step toward darkness is followed by another until there is no turning back. The question for all of us to ask ourselves is, ‘Am I on any kind of slope that would lead me to want to claim my Fifth Amendment rights?’”*

**Fear of losing competitive advantage.** *“Many managers fear that if they share anything about the business with their employees, the information will be used by competitors or by the employees themselves against the company. Ironically, the opposite is true.”* Companies like Harley-Davidson depend on employee input and collaboration to bolster production numbers and financials.

**Fear of losing face.** *“We worry about what other people think of us. When this worry becomes too great it can keep us from telling the truth or cause us to lie in order to save face and appear*

*competent. The costs can be high.”* A leader or employee may be justifiably reluctant to tell the truth or express himself openly if doing so might put him in an unwanted, ego-sapping spotlight.

## **Law #2: Tackle the Problem**

***“When the prevailing attitude is always to cooperate but rarely to confront, you can expect problems to fester under the surface. The solution is constructive confrontation.”***

Constructive confrontation means *“confronting others when you disagree with them, but doing it in a way that achieves the best resolution to the problem at hand and, ideally, strengthens the relationship between the confronting parties.”* This system has been used at Intel since the 1970s. *“It is a communication process designed to resolve problems and difficult issues.”* The approach includes six steps:

1. **Do your homework.** Research the issue and decide if it's worth confronting. Identify the desired outcome. What is the Other Person's perspective?
2. **Open the debate.** Describe the problem or issue specifically. Use “I” language, and focus on the present and future.
3. **Open your ears.** Don't get too wrapped up in the rightness of your position. Reciprocate by using give-and-take to achieve mutual needs. Be first to listen, and listen for understanding and respect.
4. **Open your mouth.** Present your point of view in terms of the way you see it, not as if it were the truth. Be clear and firm about what you need. Summarize the benefits, and include the drawbacks. State your feelings as a means of clarifying them for both of you.
5. **Open your mind.** Move to finding a workable solution. Get agreement on the outcome. Review the data. Review both person's concerns, and ask for solutions that address each. And ask tough questions to separate the wheat from the chaff.
6. **Close the deal.** Make sure that the decision is followed with action. Assign actions and follow-up dates, and rigorously adhere to them.

Have you ever had a disciplinary or severance situation where the past performance reviews don't tell the truth? Where the problems have been ignored or minimized? Where someone who is performing inadequately is passed around like a bad penny from one part of the organization to another? When you have to discipline or fire someone, is the action usually too early or too late? In an organization where honest information flows freely, and where the atmosphere is one of dealing openly and honestly with problems, these situations are not swept under the rug.

Note that other team members are watching what you do. If you put off tackling a problem, it is you – not the problem causer – that will take the hit.

***“The aim of argument or of discussion should not be victory, but progress.”*** Joseph Joubert

## **Law #3: Disagree and Commit (Constructive Conversation)**

***“Who hasn't been to a meeting where everyone agreed on a decision, then ran back to their desks to lobby against it or even sabotage it? Better methods of consensus are available, as are mechanisms for what to do when you're asked to support a decision that is morally, ethically, or legally wrong.”***

Intel is a good example of a culture of healthy debate where people are encouraged to speak up. But Intel knows that you can't have a culture that just disagrees. The culture needs to be one of commitment, too. Speak up when the opportunity presents itself, don't whine later.

Constructive conversation encourages people to be open to disagreement. Consider the PAL approach: When life deals you a hand you don't like, you have three healthy options: **P**ositive Change, **A**cceptance/Embracing, or **L**eaving.

- **Positive Change** Do / Say / Act on it. “Do something to change what you don't like. Take action that will effect a difference. Present a proposal that proves there's a better way.” The key is to do something directly and actively.
- **Acceptance / Embracement** This refers to true acceptance and support, not malicious compliance. *“If you are married to someone you want to change, it makes for an interesting first marriage.”*
- **Leave** If you don't like what is going on, and neither positive change nor acceptance is an option, then leave. Whether it's working a tedious job, or being involved in a bad relationship, or having to be around someone who lights up the room when he's not there, a reasonable choice is to leave. But before you walk away, consider what you'd be giving up. It may be wise to accept a bad hand if there are off-setting attributes. Johnson tells the story of a friend who was very dissatisfied with his wife's weight gain, and was considering leaving. But his deep love with her and her many attributes hugely offset his dissatisfaction so he turned to Acceptance / Embracement as a healthy and ultimately satisfying choice.

Note again that all three of these approaches are healthy options. In fact, in any disagreement, a sensible option really has to be one of the three, doesn't it? The key is to assign the right option to each situation.

Consider a situation in your job that you find irritating – perhaps your pet peeve – and use the grid below to help you map out your direction and determine your best action.

<b>What is the situation?</b>		
<b>Option</b>	<b>What can you do if you choose:</b>	<b>Likely outcome?</b>
<b>Positive Change</b>		
<b>Acceptance / Embracement</b>		
<b>Leave</b>		

If you decide on Positive Change or Acceptance/Embrace, consider using the constructive confrontation techniques from Law #2. Attack the problem, not the person. Listen first with respect and with abundant “go” signals. A go signal is a voice of agreement to items in the conversation as it continues; not necessarily agreeing with the statement, but showing comprehension, and giving the other party the option to continue with the conversation. “I understand.” “I see that you feel you’re being ignored.” “It’s clear that this goes against your work ethic.” “Let’s continue talking.”

“Win-win” is often touted as the best possible solution. But how many times do both sides *really* win? What about the ancillary impact? Have you seen situations where both sides have “won”, yet absent commitment by both parties, the winning has actually resulted in malicious compliance? The goal is to search for the best solution, not a win-win. This is where commitment comes into play.

In their book, Johnson and Phillips list four major reasons why people don’t commit:

1. **A perception of dishonorable intent.** *“If it looks, smells, or feel unethical, dishonorable, or illegal, don’t do it. The bottom line is to have a published set of worthwhile values, and to live by them. Simply doing the right thing is a good start.”*
2. **A perception of unfairness.** *“Allowing people to have input into decisions through participation and consensus raises the odds that they will feel the decisions are fair. Autocratic and consultative decisions can also be perceived as fair. The trick is making sure that the lines of communication are open and that everyone understands the “why” of decisions as well as the “what.”*
3. **A perception of a sham.** *“Only ask if you want to hear and plan to seriously consider what you hear. If you have sound business reasons for going a different direction than the recommended course, it is imperative that you take the time to explain to all those who participated why you have chosen to do so.”*
4. **A perception of being powerless.** *“People often resist change. Providing them with opportunities to exercise the Positive Change option increases the likelihood that they will commit to what they have agreed to.”*

So search for the best solution. And keep your cool: the more emotionally laden the conflict, the less likely it is that you will find agreement.

What would happen within your own organization if Constructive Conversation were the norm?

## **Law #4: Welcome the Truth**

***“It’s human nature to defend yourself against criticism and to attack when you feel attacked. A culture of absolute honest not only addresses this issue but transforms it into a potent tool for growth.”***

We have to be open to listening to honesty without becoming defensive. This can be difficult when the things we hear aren’t what we want to hear. Our own defensiveness often stands in the way of open conversation, and keeps us from moving toward productive outcomes. *“The idea is to move the conversation from attack-and-defend to discuss-and-problem-solve.”*

- Don’t take it personally. Take a breath and assess. We can make choices about how we feel about anything. Our hot buttons are our own. Certainly, someone can trigger them, but only we can decide whether we react or just listen.

- Apply the ABC technique: Antecedent – Belief – Consequence. Albert Ellis tells us that environmental stimuli that move us to action can be thought of in three parts: *“an antecedent, a belief through which the antecedent is filtered, and a consequence. Fortunately, our belief system is open to adaptation, and this allows us to change. Thus, we can choose to believe differently about the antecedent if we take the time to do so.”*
- Ask for clarification.
- Rephrase what the criticizer suggests.
- Consider the criticism fairly. How would an independent outsider see it?
- Acknowledge the truth.
- Describe why you don't agree with the untrue parts.
- Ask for and offer suggestions to resolve the situation.

An open mind includes the choice of hearing rather than defending.

## **Law #5: Reward the Messenger**

***“Speaking out against the status quo often brings retribution. At an absolutely honest company, it brings reward. The transition from payback to payout is one of the trickiest cultural changes to navigate, but it can be done.”***

Sometimes, honest feedback is met with blatant retribution; i.e. punishment in the form of promotion denials, unwanted transfers, and reduction of authority. More often, the retribution is more subtle and unintentional: verbal punishment, defensiveness, non-responsiveness, patronization, one-upmanship, or inaction. But whether intentional or unintentional, retribution has the same effect because in both cases, the perception becomes the reality.

Drawing from ten years of management seminars, Johnson pulled together a Manager's Code of Conduct, *“a prescription for building trust and motivating people to do their best.”*

- Trust others to the degree that you would like them to trust you. *“Trust is always a two-way street.”*
- Be a great listener. *“Active listening sets the stage for honesty and truth telling.”*
- Clarify expectations. *“Your staff may not like you, but if they know what you expect of them and that you will judge them fairly against clear criteria, you become predictable and, consequently, easier to trust.”*
- Create a milieu of honesty. *“If you want honesty, you can't tolerate even the threat of retribution.”*
- Lead by example. *“As a leader, everything you do has meaning – and people are watching.”*
- Treat everyone like a customer. *“The best managers see their people as essential to the heart and soul of the corporation, and they treat them accordingly.”*

In their book, Johnson and Phillips suggest the TARGET-K approach for handling employee complaints or suggestions.

*T – Thank the person, even if he’s bringing you information that you don’t want to hear.*

*A – Ask questions to clarify the situation.*

*R – Reassure the person that you are willing to listen and do what you can to fix the problem or address the issue.*

*G – Give your perception of the situation and what you plan to do about it, including what you expect from them.*

*E – Encourage and reinforce the behavior.*

*T – Take action to correct the situation and do the right thing.*

*K – Keep the person informed of all actions you are taking, decisions made, and progress toward a solution.*

In your organization, is honest feedback rewarded or punished? Is this known throughout the organization? What is the impact?

## **Law #6: Build a Platform of Integrity**

***“If a company wants its people to contribute their ideas freely and to speak up when wrongdoing occurs, it must lead by example. That means communicating and clarifying the values that matter – and sticking to them when times get tough.”***

Build a level of safety and a set of rules to run the organization by.

In 1943, Robert Wood Johnson published a credo which has been Johnson & Johnson’s platform for credibility ever since. In order of attention and importance, the four major concerns of the credo are:

1. customers
2. employees
3. the community
4. profitability/shareholder value.

Years later, when faced with the 1982 Tylenol crisis, *“every decision maker was able to steer a clear course that saved lives in the short run and the company in the long.”* Johnson and Phillips note that when the first three are paid attention to, the fourth – profitability – tends to take care of itself.

Every manager should have a platform of integrity for herself/himself. What’s yours? What are the bullet points? Would your people be able to accurately tell you what you hold near and dear? When you become someone’s boss, you become a famous person. You will be talked about with family and friends. You will be watched and you will find that what you say is less important than what you do. Within an organization, all of the laws rely on the Leadership.

## **Wrapping It Up**

The whole point is to not become the naked emperor, and as Johnson and Phillips have repeatedly pointed out, this does not come without risk. So here’s the question and the challenge: Are you up to it? In the interest of a better organization, better workforce, better operations, and better profitability, are you willing to move from passive truth-telling to active truth-telling?

***“Whatever your position, you can influence the honest, ethical direction your organization takes because, in the end, ethical considerations are individual considerations. It’s how we treat our peers, coworkers, employees, neighbors, friends, and family. Together, you can build an ethical culture where honesty, integrity, and respect thrive.”***

## **Thoughts from the Luncheon Discussion with Johnson and Phillips**

- According to an old Turkish saying, “If you speak the truth, have one foot in the stirrup.” So don’t sabotage honesty in your organization by placing “team player” ahead of “devil’s advocate.”
- The behavior you reinforce is the behavior you’ll get. Organizational honesty needs to be part of the culture as well as self-policing. Instead of rewarding “toe-the-line,” recognize and reward the people who ask difficult questions.
- You will be well on your way to organizational honesty if you change the leadership approach from one of force to one of influence. Consider starting with a conversation to establish the ground rules. “How do you want me to bring things up?” Consider the PAL model.
- Absolute honesty comes with a high need for consistency. If you lose trust or lie even once, it’s very difficult to regain. Should that happen, “coming clean” is absolutely necessary.
- Be wary of building rules to catch the one-in-a-hundred who might violate your trust environment. Inevitably, this will send a general message of mistrusting everyone.
- Some organizations practice semi-honesty; they recognize and applaud the positives, but they don’t deal with the negatives. This creates schizophrenic organizational behavior, and causes lack of respect for the leader. Consequences need to be clear. (See more about this in last month’s forum, Engage Your People/Enrich Your Profits, by Rita Bailey.) In the drive to clarify objectives, increase performance, establish rewards systems, and justly compensate, both positive and negative circumstances have to receive adequate attention.
- Encourage cross-cultural and cross-generational honesty by leading with your own example. Because a lot of honesty is understanding things from the other person’s point-of-view, you may need to violate your own cultural biases. One way to make this work is to use the “go” signals discussed earlier.
- Be willing to take on the tough issues/people/processes. Be proactively honest. To promote honesty, consider training your teams by giving them learning situations that will help them bridge from concept to application.