



Ethical Communications: Spinning the Truth

By Mark S. Putnam

Somewhere between the truth and a lie, there's "spin." We hear about politicians spinning bad news in their favor. We see journalists and pundits spin news stories to reflect a certain point of view. It's easy. You too can spin if you look at data, filter it through your biases, and preach it like gospel. The rationale is that it isn't really lying, just putting a bias on what is already true. So what's wrong with it?

Before you choose to spin yourself into trouble, understand that in the context of ethical communication, you should be clear, truthful, and honest in what comes out of your mouth. Spinning is like any other kind of dishonesty, it's wrong. It makes good old fashioned lying sound clever and trendy. It can be said that stupid people lie and smart people spin.

For most of us, it's not so much about telling the big whoppers as much as getting tangled in the exaggerations and spins that are commonplace. Adding "spin" to favor your side of the story doesn't require much premeditation. In fact it seems perfectly natural to talk fast and spin your response when your back is against the wall. Besides, it's not like a real lie because if you get caught you can always back out of it, spin some more, or stand by your spin as your personal "opinion."

Accepting ethical gray areas as "normal" is asking for trouble. Honesty is the best policy. When a customer, coworker, or friend looks you in the eye, he or she expects to hear the truth and not spin. An orderly society needs to operate on the premise of truth and honesty. Without some standard of truth, people will tend to satisfy their own interests, desires, and feelings. Who wants to live in a world where everyone sets their own behavioral standards?

Luckily, the universal expectation that people tell the truth is alive and well. Fortunately, you don't have to worry about getting ripped off every time you buy something. You trust that when you shake hands on a

deal, the other person is being straightforward with you. Of course, wisdom and good judgment still mandate a healthy amount of caution, but you can go through life with a fair amount of trust in your fellow man.

What throws this precariously balanced moral trust out of whack is the gradual acceptance that a little spin is acceptable. The urge to spin the truth works its way very subtly into our lives. We start to stretch the facts. We're quick to rationalize and weasel out of jams. We look out for ourselves and shift responsibility or leave out undesirable facts. Before you know it, spin becomes a regular part of your communication with others.

Ethical communication is not only about what IS said, but what is NOT said. Rule #1 in spinning is to only tell people what they need to know. Some parts of the truth get conveniently left out. Withholding information is so easy to do without guilt or effort because all it requires is to do nothing. No fibbing,

*"Oh, what tangled webs
we weave when first we
practice to deceive."*

From Macbeth

no stories, no sweat, just a closed lip and the hope that no one reads between the lines. But make no mistake, lies by omission are still lies and are still wrong. In business it may be tempting to leave out undesirable details that may hinder a deal. Don't let important things go unsaid.

It is a matter of keeping an ethical perspective and being watchful for behaviors that undermine the truth. If you aren't vigilant in watching what you say then your instinct for self preservation will kick in and you'll start spinning. The more you spin the truth the harder it is to stop. If you continue to spin for any length of time, you will begin to believe your own lies.

Let the words that come out of your mouth be honest and devoid of spin. There should be no higher compliment than to have other people say that they can, "count on you for the truth." You will be believable, trusted, and respected. Ethical communication is an obligation. People expect it from you. In a world where the spin-doctors operate, keep yourself in good ethical health.