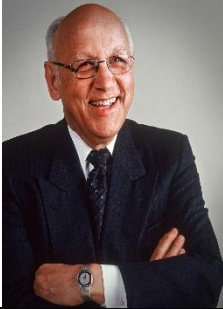




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Everybody Lies



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With an original title of “Power Corrupts” for this paper, I changed gears in mid-stream because of the facts emanating from a book sharing the above eponymy. The truth of the matter is human behavior takes us down a certain path, one we have been following for over 700,000 years, but one we have cleverly decided to bypass only a few thousand years ago. That is, we decided to be nice to each other because that (in the form of cooperation) got us a lot further as a species. But niceness and the evolutionary need to dominate remain in constant conflict. Each day we see the learned behavior of niceness being turned over by lies and domination by those with power. Of course, I am not here to offer a moral lecture; I am here to explain what is going on your head and why you behave the inexplicable way that you sometimes do, or why others behave that way. The final note is what I believe you should do about it.

Everybody Lies¹: Seth Stephens-Daviowitz, a former Google data scientist (and a now a writer) analyzed the data appearing on the Internet as voluntarily put forward by billions of individuals seeking information, just like you. What he discovered was not only that lying was common, but it was endemic. For example, volunteered information on Facebook offered a bucolic picture of individuals, their families, marriages and their lives. Yet the statistics emanating from enquiries of millions of people via Google, or other search engines, painted quite a different, and very damning story. The number one complaint via Google about marriages was ‘not having sex – 3-1/2 more common than ‘unhappy marriages’. Americans search more for ‘porn’ on Internet than they do for ‘weather, yet only about 15% of Americans admit they watch porn. Another socially damning factor coming from Internet statistics is that racial prejudice is showing to be far more prevalent than otherwise believed; for example, about 300,000 Americans visit the ‘Hitler’ site every month.

When Netflix first began, it asked individual subscribers what kind of movies they themselves would like to see. The individuals listed numerous noble titles, documentaries, etc. But when it came to purchase, their selections were far less noble. It didn’t take long for Netflix to abandon the enquiry and simply use the data provided by each person’s actual selections. This may not seem like too dramatic an example, except that it clearly demonstrated that for the most part, people were lying to themselves. So where do we start with self-lying as a base? As for your own lies, most people lie to police about how many drinks they have had, to customs officers about how much they have purchased while out of the country, to the tax man about how much money they have earned, to their friends on how many times per week they go to the gym, to their peers on how many of the books on their shelves they have actually read. People say, “I’m fine” when they are anything but. Some men say they like women when they really like men..... it is endless.

The positive take on this digital Internet truth serum is that it can lead us to understand real problems, and thus take us to real solutions. For example, Google data shows that, for the most part, violent movies lead to less real violence on the streets afterwards. A/B testing by the Internet illustrates that minor, minor factors have outsized value, such as the colour of the background on an Obama ad during his first election run. Other tests show that the university attended has no influence on the resulting income or success of the individual; it depends much more on the makeup of the person¹. Someone who mentions ‘God’ when borrowing is 2.2 times less likely to pay the loan back. Cities that stage the Olympics or the World Cup, result in amassing horrendous

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debts, no measurable long-term benefits, and white elephant stadiums afterwards; yet cities clamour to join the debt-ridden parade. Perhaps somebody is lying.

Power Corrupts: When we pass through the security at airports or get pulled over by a police officer on the street we know we have to be on our best behavior because they have the power – and if challenged, are quite likely to use it. Little Anthony lorded it over smaller Donny (my two sons) almost daily during their first youthful years – as is observed more often than not, during many sibling interchanges. A newly commissioned sergeant plays havoc with the troops under his command. When I just appointed a Vice President, I had to constantly tell him to let off the throttle; ultimately, he faced a mutiny and we had to part ways.

Common Theme: The message that both sections above share is that we all want to win. By lying (even to ourselves) we feel we move ourselves more up than down against another, and by lording our power over an inferior opponent, we emphasize that we are the winner. We were designed this way in Mother Nature’s grand scheme of things. The winner takes all, and still today, in many species, chimpanzees, walruses, and deer, the dominate one, usually a male, gets all the partners. This method ensures that the strongest genes pass onto the next generation to better assure an increasingly stronger breed.

However, as we animals developed intelligence, we saw that cooperation with others allowed us to achieve much more – better food and a better life. Current statistics show that cooperation, in the form of monogamous marriage, leads to people with better health, wealth, sex lives; they live longer; they die happier – so marriage is like a health insurance policy.

Conclusion: So, now, 700,000 years later, we are torn between the ‘ying’ of wanting to dominate and the ‘yang’ of understanding that cooperation takes us much further than solo flight ever could. So, leaders out there, you have a choice: do you want to suffer the shortcomings of domination or to enjoy the benefits of cooperation? Do you want to prove to your staff members that you are almighty or do you want to enjoy the 30% increase in output (our statistics show) that the first wave of cooperation will produce? If you choose cooperation, realize it is not a part-time thing. Months of cooperation can be destroyed with one dominant action that your allies view as threatening. You have got to be humble. Get down in the mud with those reporting to you, spend time to understand them, to train them, to share your spoils with them, and to raise each of their own capabilities even higher, an advantage that you too will eventually enjoy.

The choice is yours.

Bill

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