Introduction

The phenomenon of lying is surprisingly widespread and complex, which provokes riveting discussions about ethics and human psychology. Why do people lie and how to approach the problem of lying? While discussing this, I will also try to explain briefly our NATO Code of Conduct.

It would be hard to imagine that anyone within our NATO family would lie or cheat. The perception is that staff members are always honest about everything. In theory, however, that would be difficult to assume, because as humans, we all lie about something. And there is enough academic research to support this statement. In fact, statistics show that the average number of lies told by a person per day is 1.65. That being said, this number is not very useful to us, because, as we all know, it is the magnitude of the lie or the dishonesty that is important; it could be anything from a student trying to cheat on an exam by looking over another student’s shoulder or the golf buddy who always seems to get out of bunkers without any difficulty and always bends down to remove "debris" from the sand around his ball when nobody else you play with ever does, to the Enron fraud scandal or Volkswagen’s emissions scandal, at the other end of the spectrum.

Lying and cheating may end up costing society a fair sum of money. Actually, the smaller acts of dishonesty may add up to larger corporate losses. Take tax evasion or avoidance for example; there are those that would be tempted to declare less income, profits or gains than the amounts actually earned. By misrepresenting the true state of their affairs, even with small amounts, they can eventually cause a greater loss to tax authorities. The good news is that for NATO and the JWC in particular, encouraging open and honest communication and the core values are not difficult. But, before I explain why this matters and how this could be achieved, let’s start by understanding why people lie in the first place.

Why do people lie?

Many researchers in behavioral studies believe that lying is not rational. In other words, people do not decide whether to lie or cheat based on internal rational thinking measuring the likelihood of getting caught, the extent of the punishment and the benefit gained from lying. In other words, lying is more about how you view yourself; it is not about measuring pros and cons. The problem is that many criminal justice systems base their methods and approaches on the premise that a criminal person would do an internal cost-benefit analysis before committing a crime. So, in order to prevent crime they either impose higher fines, or employ more watchdog police and increase surveillance.

This internal cost-benefit analysis theory, however, does not offer a waterproof explanation, because people may also choose not to cheat even without a risk of getting caught. In some rural parts of Norway, for example, parking is paid by dropping the money in a box leaving it entirely up the individual con-
science. And the majority of visitors does pay, even when there is barely any risk of someone discovering it. In other words, the cost-benefit theory does not consider that people indeed think about what is moral or ethical. I would argue that people tend to lie mostly when this behaviour does not cross one’s own boundaries of morality. In other words, we cheat only if we can still live with ourselves afterwards. The boundaries of ethics and morality differ from person to person, and they are flexible.

As an experiment to determine the flexibility of that boundary, Professor Dan Ariely—a researcher of behavioral economics and author of "The Honest Truth About Dishonesty"—asked students to take a math test and to rate their correct answers themselves. The students would then shred their written test, report their results and receive one dollar for each correct answer. What the students did not know was that the shredder was played with and so it only shredded the sides of the pages. So, how many would falsely claim more correct answers and by which amount would they cheat?

The result was that many people cheated, but only a little. Interestingly, when promised a bigger reward, i.e. 10 dollars per right answer, the cheating decreased. This certainly proved the cost-benefit theory wrong. In fact, it is fascinating to see that the larger the reward, the less people would lie or cheat. The reason is probably that people would be uncomfortable with lying or cheating "too much," and not be able to live with themselves afterwards.

Another experiment involved a candy vending machine installed in a public area, where passers-by could buy a candy bar for one dollar. What they did not know was that the machine was adjusted to accommodate no charge required vending, so whenever someone inserted their dollar, they got the candy bar and the one-dollar note back. Even though the vending machine had a contact number around the side nobody bothered to report it. Interestingly, many even picked up the phone to let their friends know about their treasure trove. Apparently, cheating increases if it is more socially acceptable, "if my friends are doing it, so could I." Maybe signing up for Ashley Madison’s online dating service marketed to people who are married or in committed relationships might be easier, since you are only following in the footsteps of 40 million users!

To conclude, lots of people cheat a little bit and very, very few cheat a lot. Moreover, lying or cheating is not dramatically influenced by the danger of getting caught. Neither does cheating increase with more money involved. It seems that cheating is influenced by moral standards [can I rationalise my behaviour and still live with myself?], which in turn depends partly on social acceptance.

How to remain honest?

The same math test as described above was repeated with other students at an esteemed university. The university had a Code of Conduct, which the students were introduced to in their first year of university. When reminded of that Code prior to taking the test, the results of the experiment were that almost nobody cheated. The same effect was achieved when people were asked, prior to taking the test, to recite as many of the Ten Commandments as they could remember. Even though some of them could only remember a few, none of the participants did cheat. The experiment was even taken further at a university that did not have a Code of Conduct. Nevertheless, the students were required to sign a statement that they adhere to the (non-existent) university’s Code of Conduct. The results were the same: none of the students cheated, even without knowing the contents of the Code.

This shows that having a written Code of Conduct is important as it can effectively reduce any prospect of cheating while increasing honesty. The behaviour of NATO staff members is, as anyone else, influenced by moral and social standards. And, luckily, NATO does have a Code of Conduct. In fact, the organisation has many military Codes of Conduct for the specific headquarters in addition to the overarching NATO Code of Conduct, applicable to all staffs. These codes contain related cultural memoranda or mission statements that highlight similar principles, and in NATO’s case, the five core values.

NATO’s Code of Conduct

The NATO Code of Conduct was approved by the North Atlantic Council (NAC) on 2 December 2013. Prior to this date, there were other versions of the Code, and they also highlighted the main principles of Integrity, Loyalty, Accountability, Impartiality and Professionalism. It is important to note that the NATO Code of Conduct is not intended to serve as a set of rules and regulations that can be "enforced" by management, but rather as a guiding document. As for NATO International Civilians (NICs), the Civilian Personnel Regulations (CPRs) is the primary policy to which civilian staff should adhere.

The Code of Conduct states that NATO staff members should be "honest and truthful in [...] dealings; fully presenting all facts in an unbiased and clear manner." Significantly, the five values of the NATO Code of Conduct (see above) permeate regulations such as the financial regulations, purchasing and contracting policies and many other core values as well. In fact, the Code regulates how we interact both internally and externally, e.g. whether staff is allowed to accept gifts for lectures or speeches or have a second job. Even though the Code is written in a very plain and simple language, most staff members may not be able to recite its exact wording; this is understandable and expected, because it is the reminder of its existence that makes people stick to it and follow its core values. In fact, the reminder is more effective than increasing monitoring or imposing larger sanctions, although the latter is very important too.

To conclude, it is not those few that cheat a lot who are extremely costly for both businesses and society, it is the aggregate of many smaller acts of dishonesty, even everyday dishonesty, that count for the highest revenue loss.

For those of you who are interested in knowing more about the phenomenon of cheating and lying, you can download Professor Dan Ariely’s book "The Honest Truth About Dishonesty" illegally by following this link (don’t worry, no one is watching): http://meshesblog.westby.com/uploads/5/6/3/0/56303307/the_honest_truth_about_dishonesty-dan_ariely.pdf

Alternatively, you can purchase the book on Amazon for 11 dollars!

OTHER REFERENCES
* Source, Wikipedia.

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