



When Do Exaggerations and Misstatements Cross the Line?

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When public figures are caught embellishing their accomplishments or qualifications, whether by exaggeration or misstatement, people everywhere express outrage. Indeed, as more and more politicians, CEOs and other big names these days try to make amends for fudging their resumes, incorrectly relating the details of a story or otherwise playing fast and loose with the facts, the general reaction from an increasingly jaded public is: "What were they thinking?"



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As it turns out, what they were thinking isn't much different from everyone else. Embellishment is part of human nature, experts say, and almost everyone is guilty of it at one time or another. Left unchecked, however, exaggerations that seemed innocuous at first could result in serious, potentially career-ending consequences. "[Getting caught] can be devastating; I think it can ruin a person," says [Alan Strudler](#), a professor of legal studies and business ethics at Wharton. That's unfortunate, he adds, "because embellishment is just a human frailty. But once you're caught in a deception, even if it's a common deception, people won't trust you. And once the bond of trust is lost, it's terribly hard to recover."

In today's work environment, where no one comes in for a job interview without being Googled first -- and where small talk in the elevator or comments made at a staff meeting are just a Twitter post away from reaching a global audience -- it's easier than ever to get caught in an exaggeration, Wharton experts and others note. But the temptation to embellish has also never been greater, they say, as recession-weary workers feel pressured to justify their worth and a 24-hour news cycle demands that leaders have an immediate, sound-bite-ready answer for everything.

"The questions come when something happens that breaks the social facade that we're all honest and we're all trustworthy," says [G. Richard Shell](#), a legal studies and business ethics professor at Wharton. "When someone is revealed to have done something selfish, there's a crack in the facade and then everyone has to figure out what that means. Does the crack reveal some sort of venal person, or does it reveal the same sort of hapless person we all are underneath?"

Finding the Line

The type of self-deception that most people employ falls in the middle of a spectrum occupied at one end by those who are complete truth-tellers, and as a consequence are often considered "rude and socially inept -- think of a small child telling a dinner guest that she's fat," says Shell -- and at the other end of the spectrum by pathological liars, who occupy a fantasy world that they believe to be real.

"Self deception is something that everyone is prone to," Shell notes. "There's a lot of research that says if we lack any positive illusions then that is a sign of depression.... We like to think of ourselves as being more important, more skilled and more experienced than we are. When a test comes, and someone asks what your experience is, or what your basis for stating something is, then it's tempting to make something up." Indeed, a 2003 report by the Society of Human Resources Management found that 53% of all job applications contain some kind of inaccurate information. Although only 8% of respondents to a 2008 CareerBuilder survey admitted to lying on their resumes, nearly half of the hiring managers queried said they had caught a prospective hire fabricating some aspect of his or her qualifications. Almost 60% of employers said they automatically dismissed applicants caught making misstatements about their backgrounds.

The challenge, experts say, is not to cross the line from harmless puffery to a more damaging form of elaboration. In some cases, the limits of what is accepted and what isn't are clear-cut -- few would condone amplifications that break the law, for example, or cause others serious harm. Equally prone to reproach are cases in which company executives or leaders within an organization are found to have included degrees they never earned, or positions they never held, on their resumes, according to Wharton operations and information management professor [Maurice Schweitzer](#).

He recounts the story of Marilee Jones, a former dean of admissions at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and the author of a popular guide to the college admissions process. Although she encouraged college applicants not to overstate their accomplishments, Jones resigned from her position in 2007 after it was discovered that she had fabricated two academic degrees on her initial job application in 1979 and added a third later on. "I think what happens is that people feel under pressure, so they misrepresent something to give themselves an edge and it becomes very hard to correct," Schweitzer notes. "In the case of Jones, she lied about her educational background when she started working at MIT and it was 28 years before they caught it. At some point, it becomes hard to take [fabrications] off a resume."

In a more recent high-profile case, Connecticut attorney general and U.S. senate candidate Richard Blumenthal was accused of misrepresenting his military service record. Blumenthal reportedly made several statements about fighting in the Vietnam War, but he was actually part of the Marine Corps Reserve at the time, serving in Washington, D.C., and Connecticut. Embellishments often evolve and Blumenthal's case "is a classic example," Schweitzer says. "There's a kernel of truth -- he did serve in the military during the Vietnam era and over time, his claims moved further and further from the truth. Again, nobody checks these things so [they] became a familiar refrain. People get emboldened by the deceptions they do get away with, to the point where they feel like they can get away with [additional exaggerations]."

A certain amount of embellishment is expected in some situations -- marketing and advertising campaigns, for example. In recommendation letters and job interviews, "we expect people to accentuate the positive," states Schweitzer. "We expect recommendation letters to say someone is great when perhaps they're merely good, and on resumes we expect people to describe their work in glowing terms."

More ambiguous are embellishments that involve people taking sole credit for the work of a team, or misrepresenting the money saved through an efficiency process, Schweitzer says. "I think the reason why these misrepresented college degrees or work experiences are so disturbing is because they clearly crossed the line. You either have the degree or you don't have the degree.... Over-claiming credit is something that's in this vaguer category where I think people do get away with it, and I think some of it is expected."

Pressure to Perform

The acceptance level for embellishment has a lot to do with the culture in which people live and work and the kind of values they grow up with, notes [Monica McGrath](#), a Wharton adjunct management professor. "There's the corporate culture and then there's the particular culture of a company like BP or Facebook; every company has its own organizational norms for what's rewarded," she says. "I think there's also the system that we live in, that we're living in the United States right now under these circumstances at this time. All of those systems influence our behavior on a daily basis."

In some countries, and corporate cultures, taking singular credit for a team effort is seen as self-aggrandizing and off-putting, while executives in other environments might be criticized for not being assertive enough about their accomplishments if they recognize the contributions of a group. "I work with women executives who keep telling me they have to be more self-promoting because every time they say 'my team' [their supervisors] think they didn't do anything," McGrath notes. The pressures created by the recent recession have put many American workers on the defensive, McGrath continues, and they may be driven to misstatements that run contrary to their core ethics in the interest of holding onto their jobs. "Unfortunately, many companies right now are suffering from very scarce resources, so we've all got to fight for them," McGrath notes. "[Employees think] 'I've got to be the best and the brightest and if I'm not quite the best and the brightest, the assumption will be that I don't have what it

takes and I'm expendable."

Getting caught up in the pressure to deliver can result in people becoming distracted from the truth and dissuaded from behavior that might help them in the long run. For proof, McGrath suggests looking no further than recent public relations gaffes by BP CEO Tony Hayward, who has been ridiculed for underplaying the environmental impact of the company's oil gusher in the Gulf of Mexico. "I think in another context [Hayward] would be watching this and thinking to himself, 'God, what [is this person] thinking?'" she says. "The stress of the situation, the culture of the organization and our desire to preserve what we have, all come together like a perfect storm, and there you are suddenly saying, 'Oh the spill's not that bad.'"

Often, the leaders in a particular environment set the standard for what actions will be tolerated from others. If exaggeration is rewarded, or treated as benign, within a particular workplace setting, then employees are given the impression that it is accepted -- or even encouraged. "When you're working at a company, you can see the CEO, and what the CEO does and believes," McGrath says. "It may be that [workers are] so caught up in what I have to deliver, that I don't even realize that what I have to do is embellish and cover up.... In banking [during the 2008 financial crisis], I think most people really believed that what they were doing was in the best interest of their customers; but it was really in their best interest. They frame it as: 'It was my job to do that.'"

As unemployed workers face unprecedented competition for a limited number of job openings, the temptation grows to use embellishment as a way of making their resumes stand out, says Debra Forman, an executive coach based in Toronto. Some want to exaggerate to meet the minimum standards for a particular position, but Forman has also encountered many older workers who want to downplay their education and experience so as not to appear overqualified for a particular job. "You've got to be cautionary there as well, because people are afraid of hiring someone who underestimates what he or she does," Forman notes. "I tell people not to necessarily play around with their resumes as much as thinking about what the hiring manager is looking for and how you can deal with it in an honest way."

Spreading Like Wildfire

Thanks to the Internet and other technological advancements, past misstatements have a much longer shelf life, and embellishments are more vulnerable to being detected. When Hillary Clinton told a story during her 2008 Presidential bid about landing in Bosnia under sniper fire, for example, news footage quickly came to light that showed her claims were off the mark. As for resumes, they no longer exist only on paper, but on Facebook, personal websites and LinkedIn, where they can often be accessed by anyone.

Forman, who advises executives to do an Internet search for prospective clients before meeting them, recalls attending a conference recently in which the speaker immediately followed up a statement by asking the audience not to post his comments on Twitter. "I thought, 'Well why did you say it?'" she says. "People have to remember that things will live on after they come out of your mouth. Think before you talk; it just goes back to the basics. And now we have tools that spread things like wildfire." These comments don't ever disappear, she adds, "because things do not die on the Internet."

Although Schweitzer agrees that our ability to fact-check others is "unprecedented," he notes that there are still limits to what can be verified with a simple web search. "If I tell you that I was part of a process improvement that saved \$25 million, that's hard to check. It's hard to know whether I was or I wasn't part of that process improvement and it's hard to know what the savings really were." It's easier to simply check if the person was at least present during the event he or she describes.

The best way to avoid career-damaging misstatements is to become adept at self-editing, Schweitzer says, and to be open to allowing a coach or friend to ferret out any claims that cross the line. "If people are unprepared, they're going to be more likely in the heat of the moment under pressure to say something that isn't true or take credit for things that they didn't do. Or they might embellish their accomplishments at the risk of crossing an ethical boundary," he adds. "The best approach is to prepare, to anticipate the kinds of questions that you're going to get. You want to feel very comfortable with the work you've done and have a very clear story about what you did and what you can take credit for."

But memory is subjective, and people tend to remember history through the lens of their current reality,

notes [Stewart Friedman](#), a Wharton management professor and director of the Wharton Work/Life Integration Project. When people succumb to their natural tendency to embellish, the possibility of forgiveness and making amends is largely determined by evidence of their character up to that point. "Reputations are real and they build up over time. It makes it a lot easier for someone to trust you if they've heard from someone else that you're trustworthy," he says. "We don't have enough time to check everything and there aren't enough lawyers in the world to have contracts for everything. That's why trust is such an important aspect of organizing your life and your career."

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