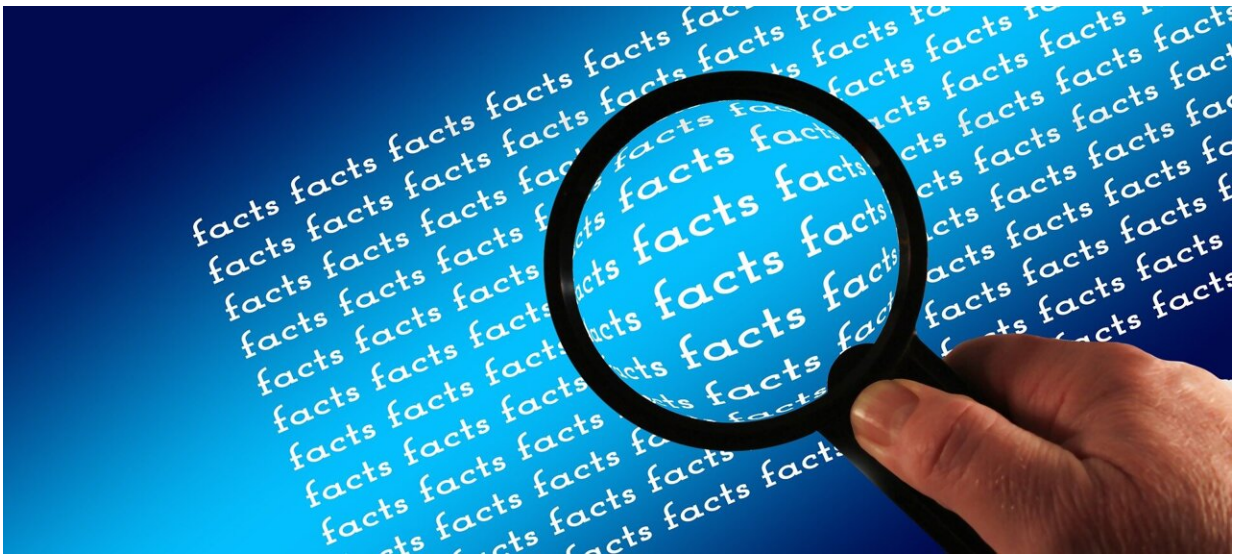


# New framework on honest behavior suggests it is a process that goes beyond not lying

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Most people value honesty while also recognizing that it is sometimes beneficial to be dishonest. This tension leads individuals to engage in behaviors that stretch the boundaries of honest behavior, such as strategically avoiding information, dodging questions, and making misleading statements. In a new article, researchers reviewed work from a range of disciplines to develop a framework that highlights how honest behavior encompasses much more than the commonly held view of either telling the truth or lying.

The article, by researchers at Carnegie Mellon University (CMU), the University of Chicago, Northwestern University, and Wake Forest University, is in the *Academy of Management Annals*.

Based on their findings, the authors say the narrow focus on honest content, which largely reduces the study of honesty to lying versus truth-telling, is problematic and connected to modern day societal challenges such as the spread of misinformation. Instead, they suggest that honest behavior is a complex phenomenon that is more than a single behavior focused on truth-telling; it is a broader relational act of communication.

"Honest behavior has relational elements—for example, fostering an accurate understanding in others through what we disclose and how we communicate—and intellectual elements—for example, evaluating [information](#) for accuracy, searching for [accurate information](#), and updating our [beliefs](#) accordingly," explains Taya Cohen, Associate Professor of Organizational Behavior and Business Ethics at CMU's Tepper School of Business, who coauthored the article.

Researchers reviewed nearly 170 empirical articles published between 2000 and 2021, covering the fields of management, [organizational behavior](#), applied psychology, and [business ethics](#). They identified four distinct facets of honest behavior, and highlighted that the process of being fully honest begins with communicators forming accurate beliefs based on a process of evaluation, search and incorporation (intellectual honesty), sharing their beliefs truthfully without lying (honest content), ensuring that they provide sufficient disclosure without leaving out [relevant information](#) (honest disclosure), and doing so in a way that allows listeners to form an accurate understanding of the message (honest delivery).

As part of this process, the authors outlined findings regarding the antecedents and consequences for each of these facets of honest

behavior, concluding that engaging in honest behavior has consequences for both communicators and listeners, on an individual, social and organizational level. Additionally, to generate ideas to guide future research, the authors highlighted findings from a variety of other fields, such as [social psychology](#) and communication, while also connecting honest [behavior](#) to other prominent concepts in the management literature (e.g., voice/silence, psychological safety) that have not included discussions of honesty.

The framework has practical implications for individuals and organizations wishing to increase honesty, the authors suggest. It can be used to encourage people to seek truthful information, update their beliefs based on this information, and attempt to foster true beliefs in others as part of the information-sharing process, to create a safe and inclusive workplace environment.

"We must consider not just what people do or do not say, but also how beliefs are formed, the extent to which beliefs are updated when needed, and whether recipients walk away from communication exchanges with the same beliefs that communicators meant to convey," says Benny Cooper, a Post-Doctoral Fellow in Organizational Behavior and Theory at CMU's Tepper School of Business, who led the study. "It is only by understanding all these nuanced honesty-related behaviors that we can develop effective methods for cultivating the virtue of [honesty](#) in people and organizations."

**More information:** Binyamin Cooper et al, Honest Behavior: Truth-Seeking, Belief-Speaking, and Fostering Understanding of the Truth in Others, *Academy of Management Annals* (2023). [DOI: 10.5465/annals.2021.0209](https://doi.org/10.5465/annals.2021.0209)

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