

# LEADERS OUGHT TO KNOW

*11* Ground Rules  
*for*  
Common Sense Leadership

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## *Chapter 5*

# **Honesty and Other Truths**

### **Ground Rule #5**

Leaders don't play loose with the truth;

Leaders lead from a position of unquestioned honesty.

### **The Truth about Honesty**

Not long ago, I was having a conversation with a colleague of mine. We were talking about various people we knew in common when my friend asked pointedly, "Do you know so-and-so?" The person he mentioned was not a friend of mine, but was someone with whom I was vaguely familiar.

"Yeah, I know who you're talking about," I confirmed. "But I can't say that I know him well."

"Well, if you knew him like I know him, you'd know that he tells the truth just often enough to keep everyone confused."

The line was delivered with a dry, matter-of-fact tone that I initially found to be rather humorous. I remember thinking,

*what an interesting turn of a phrase—“just often enough to keep everyone confused.”*

But then, as the humor passed, I began thinking about the serious impact his words had. Leaders should never be known for *causing* confusion. My friend had felt compelled to provide an unsolicited warning—albeit one housed in a sheath of humor—concerning another person’s questionable relationship with the truth (to put it generously). When anyone—but *especially* those of us in leadership positions—somehow earns a reputation for playing loose with the truth, others inevitably will hear about it. As a result, our leadership positions, reputations, and effectiveness are sure to suffer. Believe me. I know.

### **The Scheduler’s Position**

I looked up after hearing a knock at my office door and recognized my visitor immediately. Gary and I were coworkers at the same manufacturing plant. He was in inventory control, and I was the employee relations supervisor. Though we were about the same age, both of us in our mid-20s at the time, Gary had been with the company for two or three years longer.

There were two things in particular that stood out about Gary. First, he had this strange habit of treating me with an unusually high level of respect, occasionally bordering on deference. A number of times in conversation he had actually referred to me as “sir”—as in “yes, sir” or “no, sir” in response to some basic question I had asked. That always seemed odd to me. I certainly didn’t expect such treatment. I supposed at the time that such behavior was his way of showing his respect for my position.

The second thing about Gary was that he was unfailingly polite. Even standing before me at that moment, his politeness was on display.

“C’mon in and sit down, Gary,” I offered.

“No, thanks, I’ll only be here a minute. I don’t mean to bother you. I know how busy you must be,” he said. “I just have a real quick question, if you don’t mind.”

“Sure, what is it?” I asked.

“Have y’all made a decision on that scheduler’s position?”

I knew immediately what he was asking.

It was our company policy to post all job openings. The process was simple: The job, along with a brief description, was posted on the bulletin board in the employee break room. Interested employees signed their names to the job posting form. There were no guarantees that signing the posting would result in a job. The only guarantee was an interview.

Several weeks earlier, I had posted an open job. Gary, as well as several other employees, had signed the job posting form indicating their interest. Subsequently, a group of managers that included me had interviewed each of them. But we hadn’t communicated a decision after completing the interviews.

Now, one of the job candidates was standing before me, asking where the process stood. His was a legitimate question: “Have y’all made a decision on that scheduler’s position?”

It’s crystal clear to me today, 30 years later, what the right thing for me—an aspiring leader—was to do in such a situation. But on that day, in that moment, without prior thought or preparation, the fog of immediacy enveloped me.

I knew the answer to his question. The simple, honest answer was, “Yes, we’ve made a decision (and it’s not going to

be you).” That’s what I should’ve said. That’s what I wish I would’ve said. But that’s not what I said. Not by a long shot. Instead, I heard myself utter these words: “Umh, well no, we haven’t quite made a decision yet.”

*This is just a little white lie, and a necessary one—right? What else could I say at that moment?*

“We expect to make a final decision in the next couple of weeks, though.”

*This little lie should give me wiggle room to cover that first little lie.*

“But as soon as we decide, you can be sure you’ll be the first to know.”

*While I’m at it, why not build some personal rapport? He’ll probably forget this little promise anyway.*

Have you ever noticed how the second lie is a bit easier to tell than the first one? I didn’t wake up that morning thinking to myself, *I wonder how many people I can lie to today*. But because I hadn’t awakened with the continuing affirmation, *I will not, under any circumstances, lie to anyone today*, there I was, lying to Gary—in bunches.

Once my trifecta of untruths had been delivered, the ball was in Gary’s court. What do you think he did with it? If you think he might have questioned my truthfulness and candor, right then and right there, you would be wrong. I’m sure Gary was not channeling Ernest Hemingway in that moment; nevertheless, a Hemingway quote applied: “The best way to find out if you can trust someone is to trust them.” I’d never given Gary prior reason to *not* believe me, so he did.

On the other hand, if you think Gary probably stayed true to his character and acted like the ever-polite gentleman he

was, you would be right. Incredibly enough, he *apologized* to me.

“I’m really sorry to have bothered you, Phil. I know you guys are busy, and I’m sure you’re doing the best you can. I’m just a little anxious. But I can wait. I appreciate your time,” he said. Then he shook my hand and left.

I wish I could say that I was immediately racked with an overpowering sense of guilt and remorse for the lies I’d just told—but to claim that was the case would also be untrue. Instead, as conscienceless and unfeeling as it may sound, I just went about my business, giving the whole matter very little additional thought.

That is, until that afternoon.

Do you believe in coincidence, karma, providence, fate, destiny, comeuppance? Whatever you might call it, I got mine in full measure that afternoon. And I’ve never forgotten the lesson that came with it.

Four times a year, our employees assembled for a state-of-the-company address that our plant manager led. The address included updates on safety, quality, production, sales, profitability, and the like. It also gave employees an opportunity to ask questions.

I remember exactly where I was standing when the bomb fell. After about 20 minutes of sharing business details, our plant manager opened the floor for questions. A hand shot up on the front row.

“Yeah, any decision yet on that open scheduler’s position?” the questioner asked.

No, it wasn’t Gary asking the question. There was no need for Gary to ask. He already knew the answer. He’d gotten it

earlier in the day from the horse's, um, mouth—right? Therefore, it would've been impolite to ask again. It was one of the other candidates who posed the question to our plant manager. Gary just sat quietly and listened.

Try to imagine the horror and dismay I felt in that moment as I, too, listened to our plant manager. In fact, I could barely believe my ears.

“Yes, we've made that decision,” he said. “We actually made it several weeks ago, but we decided not to release the information then. But since we're all here, I see no harm in announcing publicly who our new scheduler is.” Then he did so.

At that moment, 399 sets of eyes were securely fixed on the plant manager. One set of eyes—Gary's—found me. And I honestly felt that his eyes could speak to me. They were saying loudly and clearly, “*You lied to me, Phil! How could you? You're nothing but a common liar!*”

As soon as the meeting ended, I knew what I had to do. I made a beeline straight to Gary. I'd created an unenviable task for myself. I had to try to mend some fences. I had to beg for forgiveness. I had to try to win back Gary's trust and respect.

“Gary, please let me explain,” I began. “You caught me at a bad time this morning. . . . I wasn't at liberty to release any information. . . . I didn't want to hurt your feelings. . . . I didn't know what to say to you,” and so I rambled on, almost incoherently.

All the while Gary stood stoically, staring at me, saying not a word or showing any emotion. Eventually, I realized I'd begun to repeat myself, so I finished with a final pitifully ineffective plea. “Gary, I hope you can understand the position I was in.”

I'd lied to Gary without cause or provocation, and now I was asking Gary—the actual recipient of my lie—to understand my position and forgive me! What gall!

Gary looked at me one last time. He'd heard enough. I don't know what was going through his head. I don't know what he was tempted to say or do. But I remember distinctly what he actually said. As he turned to walk away, he looked over his shoulder at me and, with a dismissive tone, said simply, "Whatever." No shouting, no cursing, no outward display of emotion whatsoever. He was too polite for that. He just walked away, leaving that one word, *whatever*, to ring in my ears.

## **Leadership Failures**

It's no surprise that my relationship with Gary was never the same after that day. The respect he'd shown me and my position previously was gone. I had lost it. I had failed.

I worked at that plant with Gary for another couple of years before my career led me elsewhere.

In the years since, I've lost track of him completely, but I've never forgotten the lesson I learned from that singular encounter. That experience remains with me to this day as one of my most regrettable leadership failures—and one of the best leadership lessons I've ever learned.

I'll remind you that professional failures need not be fatal or final. Our failures can actually serve as lifelong lessons, serving well those we lead, *if* we're willing to learn from them. As that famous American author and humorist Mark Twain once wrote, "Always acknowledge a fault. This will throw

those in authority off their guard and give you an opportunity to commit more.”

I believe a seedling of truth rests in such humor. As a leader, I’ve failed more times than I care to recount. And because I’m not yet ready to hang up my leadership spurs, I’m sure more failures await me beyond my current horizon. But over time, I’ve learned the value of acknowledging my failings and faults to both myself and others, as I try to learn from each one.

I returned to the privacy of my office following that fateful quarterly meeting, crestfallen and intending to lick my wounds, with the possibility of a little personal pity party thrown in for good measure. But then, sitting in the quiet isolation of my office, reality came calling. I realized that the leadership wounds I’d received that day were self-inflicted. No one had made me lie or even suggested that I should. It came too easily for me.

So I decided to make it harder for myself. In my office that afternoon, I made a promise to myself that I’ve kept until this day and that I intend to keep for the rest of my life. And while it was relatively easy to say, it’s proven much harder to keep: I will not lie to my followers.

First of all, I shouldn’t be lying because it’s wrong. *Leaders Ought to Know* that’s reason enough. But second, I—or any other leader—cannot afford the negative repercussions of such a selfish, shortsighted act as personal dishonesty.

So I’ve committed myself to being honest with my followers. If I’m to fail or suffer professionally, I intend to do so with a clear conscience, not constantly looking over my shoulder and trying to remember what version of the truth I told one person and not the other.

You may be wondering, after 30-plus years, whether it gets any easier to be honest with followers. My personal experience has been that it gets *easier* over time, but it never gets easy.

You may also be wondering if being honest, as a leader, means you must tell everyone everything you know or to which you have access. Of course not! The ability to maintain appropriate confidentiality regarding information available to you has been and always will be a critical element of leadership. Leaders of all ranks and ilks regularly possess knowledge of confidential information that they either cannot or should not share with others, for any number of reasons.

And that's when the games begin.

## **The Honesty Game**

For the record, I would do nothing intentionally to diminish the importance of honesty in this serious discussion of what *Leaders Ought to Know*. However, I readily admit my willingness to do almost anything in an effort to emphasize and anchor the importance of honesty in this same discussion of what *Leaders Ought to Know*. So I've devised a game that I call the honesty game.

### ***Game Contestants***

The honesty game pits leaders against followers.

1. *Leaders* are defined as those individuals in possession of and charged with managing confidential information on the entire organization's behalf.

2. *Followers* are defined as those individuals wishing to have immediate, unfiltered, and unrestricted access to that confidential information for their own individual, often unstated, purposes.

### ***Objectives of the Game***

The honesty game has dual objectives:

1. To build and maintain an ongoing positive, productive, and trusting working relationship between leaders and followers.
2. To manage information flow between leaders and followers employing the most honest, considerate, and efficient methods possible—all the while protecting the confidentiality and integrity of the information to be shared and the individuals it impacts (directly or indirectly).

### ***Rules of the Game***

The honesty game has differing rules for the participants:

1. Rules for leaders
  - a. Work with followers to accomplish the organization's established objectives.
  - b. Consistently share timely and appropriate information with followers in an ongoing effort to help them

do their jobs most effectively, while building and maintaining a positive, trusting working relationship with those same followers.

- c.** Do not, under any circumstances, reveal or share confidential information with followers that could be judged to violate existing laws, rules, regulations, or policies or that in any way could be construed as being:
  - i.** Illegal
  - ii.** Immoral
  - iii.** Unethical
  - iv.** Highly impractical

## **2.** Rules for followers

- a.** None.
- b.** In an effort to secure desired confidential information from leaders, it's acceptable and expected that followers will do whatever they deem necessary and appropriate, including but not limited to:
  - i.** Pressing: "Oh, c'mon, you might as well go ahead and tell me. You know I'm just going to keep asking, day after day, never letting up until you finally give in and tell me what I want to know."
  - ii.** Begging: "Please tell me what's going on. Just this once and I'll never ask again. You know you can trust me. Whatever you tell me will stay right here. I won't tell a soul, I swear."

- iii. Slamming or guilting: “How long have we known each other? Fifteen years, that’s how long! And now you won’t even share a little information with me? Well, I guess I see what this friendship really means to you.”
- iv. Threatening: “I’ll tell you right now—if you won’t do me this one little favor and tell me what’s going on, well then, don’t ever come asking for my help again, because I can promise you, you won’t get it. You can bet that I won’t forget.”

### ***Losing the Game***

Followers really can’t lose, since they never really expect the leaders to share restricted, confidential information in the first place. If followers’ attempts don’t succeed, they tend to consider themselves to be no worse off for trying. Leaders, on the other hand, can definitely lose the honesty game—along with their future ability to lead—if they prove themselves unwilling or unable to appropriately manage confidential information entrusted to them.

### ***Winning the Game***

Followers will consider themselves winners if they are able to persuade leaders to relinquish any amount of confidential information that they (the followers) didn’t have or expect to receive.

Leaders can and will come out on top if they are able to appropriately manage confidential information *and* maintain

a positive, professional, and trusting working relationship with followers, throughout and following the honesty game. And bonus points are available if they can do this despite followers' most aggressive attempts. Those bonus points come in the form of heightened respect from these very same followers.

It occurs when the followers come to a point where they consciously think: *My leader wouldn't share inappropriate, confidential information with me, despite my continued attempts to persuade him or her otherwise. Therefore, I can now trust that she or he will not share inappropriate, confidential information about me—despite others' continued attempts to have him or her do so.*

At such a point as this in the honesty game, appropriate bonus points have been earned and deposited automatically into your leadership account.

### ***Time Frame of the Game***

It's continuous; in fact, it's under way right now. Time-outs are not allowed. Get started!

### **The Zipper Factor**

What do you think of my rendition of the honesty game? *Not based in reality*, you think? *There are no real-world applications for the premise of the game*, you imagine? I beg to differ. Real-world, commonsense examples of this premise are all around us and have been for as long as there have been leaders and followers.

I can remember a dinner I had with a labor attorney friend almost 30 years ago. Despite the significant lapse of time between then and now, the conversation remains crystal clear in my mind. Why? Because of the example he shared of how a brilliant leader can (and did) win the trust of his followers by *not* telling them what they desperately wanted to know.

My friend, Richard, worked for a large law firm in Atlanta that provided specialized legal services to companies and organizations facing high-risk labor issues. Richard was especially proficient in leading nonunion organizations through the legal maze that accompanies uninvited unionization attempts in the United States. Over salad, Richard shared a story about an interaction he'd had with a client several years before. I think it perfectly illustrates how a well-intentioned leader can win the honesty game.

An independent, American zipper-manufacturing facility had been purchased by a large Japanese entity. As to be expected, the purchase created a considerable amount of immediate uncertainty within the local workforce. What would happen to the plant and those working there now? Would it be expanded, consolidated, or closed completely? What would happen to the employees if it remained open? Would the new owners honor their jobs and seniority? Would wages and benefits remain the same? Would new management enact new policies and procedures? What future plans did the new owners have for this remote operation?

From the employees' perspective, there were far more questions being asked than answers being offered. Uncertainty gave way to suspicion and dread in countless employees' minds. Some naturally began to fear the worst.

About that time, certain individuals seized the opportunity that this mood of doubt and insecurity created to launch a local union organization drive. Some employees within the company saw future union representation as their sole means of long-term security, while the new owners saw such a move as a blatant sign of distrust and disrespect. Members of the incoming management team felt as if they had not been afforded the opportunity to win the local workforce's trust and respect. Tensions grew as the union drive moved forward.

Eventually, a date for the local union election was set. As that day drew near, those supporting and those opposed to the union worked feverishly to prepare their final presentations and personal remarks for employees in an effort to make their respective cases and influence undecided voters. Emotions were running extremely high.

The Japanese parent company had hired Richard's law firm. Richard, meanwhile, had been personally assigned the task of helping guide the process internally, as well as supporting the general manager in charge. The general manager was native-born Japanese and had been reassigned to this American facility at the time of the acquisition.

"I want tell employees vote no for union. We all family. We take care of them with more raises," said the general manager to Richard in his broken English, during a closed-door strategy session.

"I'm sorry, sir," replied Richard. "You just can't say that here. In America, it's illegal for management to make any economic promises to employees before a union election. Such promises could be seen as an attempt by management to buy votes."

“No buy votes,” the general manager replied adamantly. “Together build company. We invest in people,” he asserted.

“I understand, sir. But as your legal representative, I must advise you not to mention raises during any employee meetings in advance of the union election. It will almost certainly be construed as an attempt to sway the election results. I must tell you, there could be serious repercussions if you do otherwise,” Richard warned.

But the gentleman was adamant. Though he recognized his halting English could be a potential detriment to his all-American audience, the general manager was determined to be the face and voice of the parent company. He would stand and share important information—with his own mouth—that the workforce could use to make a better informed decision.

Richard, therefore, worked closely with the general manager to sculpt a scripted, appropriate, and, most important, *legal* presentation to deliver to employees. Nevertheless, Richard could not fully relax. He recognized that it was entirely possible that the general manager would venture off script at some point. Richard admitted to having grave concerns.

It was the day before the scheduled union vote. Plant employees crammed into the meeting venue for the general manager’s presentation. At the appropriate time, the GM strode on stage and faced the audience. He proceeded, in a measured, deliberate manner, to deliver his prepared comments. His words echoed his beliefs. He shared that his company had made a significant investment in this facility because they saw great potential. They looked forward to working together to develop that potential, thus realizing significant future success for all team members. The GM finished his remarks by

stressing his belief that those successes could be even greater and secured more readily without the involvement of a third party, the union. With his prepared comments delivered, he paused momentarily, and then asked for questions.

“Yeah, I’ve got a question,” said someone in the audience. “We want to know, if we don’t vote for the union—will management give us all a raise?”

The inherent danger in the general manager’s anticipated response to the question was quite real. Any comments he made about future raises following the election were tantamount to an implied promise—or threat—on the part of company management. Any such response could easily manifest itself in an unfair labor practice charge being filed against the company. The future of the company’s relationship with the government and its own employees rested completely in the hands of the general manager.

The GM looked directly at the questioner. Once the question was finished, he paused briefly and surveyed the assembled group. Every eye and ear in the audience was trained on him in anticipation of his response. Eventually, the general manager began his slow, calculated response.

“Information up to here,” he said, using a hand gesture positioned just below eye level, before dramatically adding, “but lawyer say zipper here!” He concluded his answer by lowering his hand slightly while making a sweeping motion across his mouth as if to zip his lips.

Brilliant! Absolutely brilliant!

Of course, the audience wanted more information than the general manager ultimately provided. But legally, he gave them all he could. Nevertheless, down deep, I believe

the audience understood—and I'm betting at least some of them appreciated his handling of the situation.

Though the story is not a recent one—by Richard's accounting, it's now more than 30 years old—it still packs commonsense educational and instructional value for leaders today. At the very least, it reminds leaders everywhere that it's difficult to say the wrong thing if your lips are zipped.

### **Brutal Honesty**

I must be careful. It would be easy for me to finish this discussion regarding the value of honesty by reiterating that honesty is the most important characteristic of leadership and simply leave it at that. I certainly believe that to be true. If you don't have honesty at the heart of the leader-follower relationship, it's hard to imagine how it could ever flourish. But there is also a warning note that I must sound.

Though clearly important, honesty can also be extremely hurtful if used inappropriately. It can result in lasting, even permanent damage to that same leader-follower relationship. On far too many occasions over the years, I've seen men and women in significant leadership positions opt to use honesty like a chain saw instead of a scalpel. They rightfully (too often, even *proudly*) argue that they were just delivering some sort of unassailable truth—a truth that others appeared unable or unwilling to deliver. In the process, they casually—and perhaps intentionally—ignore the subtleties of appropriate, follower-focused truth telling. The long-term results are often hurt feelings, fractured relationships, and possibly even vindictive responses.

Such undesirable outcomes may begin like this.

A group of managers or supervisors sit around a conference room table discussing some organizational obstacle that must be overcome. Often that obstacle involves some sort of human element. As the conversation builds and continues and the managers discuss how best to deal with this particular individual, one in the group gets his belly full of the whole affair.

“I don’t understand why we’re wasting all this time!” he exclaims. “We all know that Bonnie’s the problem. But apparently, you’re afraid to tell her the truth. Well, someone needs to tell her and I’m not afraid! I’ll go tell her right now.”

With that, the individual rises to leave. Unfortunately, no one raises a hand to stop him. We let the person go on a fool’s journey without a word of direction or caution.

A few minutes later, the same individual reappears in the doorway. Obviously proud of himself, he puffs out his chest, hikes up his pants, and announces defiantly, “That message has been delivered. That problem has been fixed. Now let’s move on to more important issues, like managing this business!”

Well, the message may have been delivered, but are we absolutely sure the problem has been fixed? Or is it possible—actually, more realistic—that even more problems have been created?

A manager or supervisor who manages things—physical, financial, or technical resources—might be able to make the bull-in-the-china-shop approach work. But when leading people, discretion is the better part of valor.

Please understand that I’m not suggesting, not even for one moment, that leaders should avoid difficult conversations

when necessary. We must communicate the truth, even during difficult circumstances. But *how* we communicate difficult truths can make the long-term difference between a positive, trusting leader-follower relationship and a continuing struggle with follower interaction, engagement, and motivation. And follower motivation is a worthy goal.