



print edition

PROBLEM SOLVING: DILEMMAS: HONESTY IN PERFORMANCE REVIEWS

Exaggerating your abilities sets bar higher for yourself

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Dear Susan,

As part of our performance review, we have to write a self-evaluation. How much should I emphasize and exaggerate my accomplishments?

- *Anonymous*

Print Edition - Section Front



Dear Anonymous,

If you see yourself through rose-coloured glasses, you have plenty of company. Psychologists have long known that people evaluate themselves more positively than how their friends and acquaintances see them.

Frankly, most of us think we're more intelligent, more creative, more helpful and more attractive than we really are, and this self-applied glossy sheen helps to protect our mental health. Brutal honesty is the domain of the depressed, who researchers have found hold more accurate self-perceptions than happy-go-lucky folks.

How you see yourself and how you pitch yourself can be two very different scripts. Casting yourself in a positive light is not only normal, it's expected on evaluations; the catch is if you boost yourself too brazenly you could look like a sham. And if you erode your credibility you'll be hard-pressed to regain it.

Still, researchers are finding that a soupçon of self-deception can cast a little halo on your future.

Wendy Berry Mendes, a psychology professor at Harvard University, described experiments in which people slightly exaggerated their achievements (note the emphasis). "That tends to predict better performance down the road," she wrote in an e-mail. "For example, if I'm on a diet and am planning to

lose 10 pounds, and you ask me in the first week how much weight I have lost, I might tell you I have lost three or four, even though I lost only two. Individuals who exaggerate their current weight loss are more likely in subsequent weeks to lose more weight than those who accurately report it."

Similarly, college students who mildly shift their grade point averages upward when they describe them to other people end up improving their grades when the next term rolls around, Dr. Mendes, and two colleagues, Richard Gramzow and Greg Willard, found. And physiological measures show that they don't experience this dissimulation as a lie.

"Instead, people who engage in these slight exaggerations were quite calm and quiescent during the discussion about their college performance," Dr. Mendes said. The ones who exaggerated the most appeared most confident. They were also the ones who managed to improve their GPAs.

It's as if a little self-boost, just a little push in the right direction, is not so much an outright fiction as a statement about your goals. So, a slight exaggeration that's realistically achievable shows you not only believe in your abilities, you're publicly committing to them.

Dear Susan,

I'm a partner in a small professional firm. In general, I work with great people and have few complaints, but someone in our office gets on my nerves because she is always going on loudly about her pet causes. She's now lobbying in meetings to add an environmental logo to our letterhead, and to ban bottled water and disposable cups and plates from the office kitchen. She has also made critical comments about people's cars. The upcoming election means she is voicing her opinions even more than before and I think it's inappropriate. Should I say something?

- I Beg to Differ

Dear Beg to Differ,

In a society that values free speech - as your colleague clearly does - the question is not whether you should speak up but what you should say and how you should say it.

One thing is certain: your colleague seems sure she holds the moral high ground, and assumes everyone is on her side. If you tell her to clam up or flatly oppose her position, you'll both be hunkered in your corners. She'll brand you as a dolt for opposing her and may bait you at every opportunity. You may not care, and may even deride her self-righteousness. All of this hardly contributes to office cohesion.

I share your view that office meetings are not soapboxes for partisan politics, but neither should this employee feel she has to leave her values at the door. The middle ground is to find a common goal that channels her do-good impulses. So, instead of saying "Wrong!" or "Greenwashing!" the next time you think she's imposing her moral vision, start by recognizing her lofty intentions. Say something like: "So-and-so's suggestion is a reminder that we all want to contribute to the greater good." Then solicit a short list of apolitical charities that will be consistent with your firm's mandate, and suggest that the group choose one that the majority supports. No doubt, you're not the only one who's fed up with her moralizing, so allow the democratic process to rein her in. If you state some conditions - that charities be apolitical and respectful of others' choices - you'll subtly deflate her self-righteousness while recognizing her good intentions. She'll feel she's made a difference, and you'll all feel you're on one side.

Peace in the office counts as much as saving paper, and, in valuing group cohesion, I'm certainly not alone.

Jonathan Haidt, a social psychologist at the University of Virginia, has done research on what people find moral and the findings surprised him. Like your colleague, he first expected his own impulses to be shared by most everyone. Instead, he discovered a handful of common moral intuitions, but when he got down to the particulars - such as peoples' views on individual freedoms versus their ideas about duty, loyalty and respect - there was lots of variation.

What's shared among everyone is that we all respond to ideals about caring, preventing harm to others, and being fair. Our moral differences - whether political or cultural - arise from other values: loyalty to kith and kin, respect for authority, and ideas about "purity" that can make reasonable people loathe those with different views. What's more, Prof. Haidt found that visceral disgust reactions almost always trump logic. "Self-righteousness is a closed bubble; it's very hard to persuade anyone of anything on moral issues," he wrote in an e-mail.

So if your colleague is appalled by SUVs or paper garbage as contaminants in a pristine world, presenting competing facts is not likely to persuade her. She's simply a believer. Appealing to another human virtue - say the more common desire to reduce hunger - is the more peaceful way to go.

*Susan Pinker is a psychologist and author of *The Sexual Paradox: Extreme Men, Gifted Women and the Real Gender Gap*.*

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