



## **Lying and Boiling Frogs: How to be a More Credible Leader**

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**T**he story goes something like this: I need to sound important, so let me say something impressive. I don't have anything amazing to say, so let me enhance or fabricate something. Wow! They really liked what I said. I'll have to do that again.

Some call it exaggerating or stretching the truth, telling a little white lie, having a little fun, telling a fish tale, or misspeaking. Yet, in the end, it is not telling the truth and the way we approach the truth is what makes us authentic, inspiring, and a real leader. This topic of credibility and honesty has been brought up again with the story last month around ABC's Brian Williams. The question is, how do leaders stay truthful?

Years ago someone asked me how to boil a frog. Now, I'm no gastronomical connoisseur of frog legs and have never eaten them, but I was intrigued by the question. I learned that if you fill the pot with water, turn up the heat until it boils, and then put a frog in, it will jump right out! But if you put the frog into the cold water and slowly increase the heat, the frog never notices the small differences in temperature and stays in the pot. It gradually gets cooked without even knowing it!

The lesson is not to start small in stretching the truth. In fact, the point is to not stretch the truth at all. Enlarging and constructing facts is a dangerous business. Even if the intent is seemingly good (I want to help my team or those close to me or my organization), the truth will always emerge and your legacy as a leader will be tarnished. Don't get me wrong, we all make mistakes, but it is owning up and preventing those mistakes, especially before they reach a boiling point, which is critical for the kind of credible leadership we need today.

So, how do I avoid the easy trap of lying? Here are six ways to check yourself:

- **Listen to the stories you tell.** When you are with a group of others or especially with higher level leaders, how do you embellish your stories? If this is a concern for you, tell the story in a very bland way in your own head to make sure you get the facts

straight. Identify those facts and don't deviate from them as you phrase the story out loud.

- **Align the personal and the public.** What kinds of comments do you tell in personal settings to your family and friends? How often do you exaggerate what you say to cover your tracks or give a better than real impression? Watch and guard against this behavior creeping into your public conversations. Telling a tall tale at work can have very different consequences than over a beverage with your friends.
- **Watch how you introduce yourself.** We can sometimes suffer from the need to make ourselves sound greater than our experience or background may suggest. Or on the other hand, we may suffer from the need to talk a lot about how amazing our experiences truly have been. Either way, stick to the facts and minimize the glowing adjectives. These additional descriptors may lead us to insert new and exaggerated comments just to prove the already stretched point.
- **Take credit sparingly.** Be honest with yourself on who really contributed toward the outcome. Did your single comment or email have that much impact? Did you work alongside the team, yet act like you did? Share credit freely with others and be hesitant to take too much of it for yourself.
- **Answer questions with brevity.** We can have a tendency to talk a lot when asked a question, especially when we don't have a good answer to give. All that talking may produce enhanced statements that might even surprise ourselves. Stick to answering

the question and stop talking when you don't know what else to say. It will help keep you safe and honest.

- **Step up to the blame.** When you do say something that misrepresents the truth, don't let it linger, even if it is small. Address it, don't repeat it, and replace it with the correct version as soon as possible. Admit that you were in the wrong. It is so much easier to confess to something small, than to confront something that grew larger than intended.

We all make mistakes, but we can do a lot to prevent those mistakes from either happening or from becoming all consuming. Speak the truth and your impact as a leader will be strong—for your impact now and for your legacy in the future!