



True or False? Why Our Instinct Malfunction.

By Christian Rook

Are you as exhausted by all the lying as I am?

These days, I spend more time checking whether something is actually true than listening to what it says. And that's incredibly tiring.

And this is coming from someone who has spent the past 30 years dealing with this issue professionally. I'm essentially a trained and highly experienced human lie detector.

When I enter a new company as a transformation manager, my most important task in the first few days isn't to optimize processes or revise organizational charts.

The first thing is to figure out what is actually considered "true" in this system – and what isn't.

Because every organization lives in its own version of reality. There are official narratives, internal myths, and personal truths.

Some of them are helpful, some are protective mechanisms, and some are, quite simply – nonsense.

But they all serve a purpose: They provide orientation, belonging, and identity. And that's exactly where the danger lies.

The Bullshit Detector

In these situations, I rely on what I call my "bullshit factor" – an internal radar system that tells me when something doesn't add up.

Professionally, you might categorize that as analytical ability or critical thinking. But it's more than that. It's a combination of intuition, tolerance for ambiguity, and neural vigilance.

Humans have a deep tendency to want to close things off. Unresolved questions are stressful. Contradictions create tension.

So we reach for the first explanation that presents itself – not because it's correct, but because it allows us to move on.

Psychologists call this the **Need for Closure** – the desire for cognitive closure.



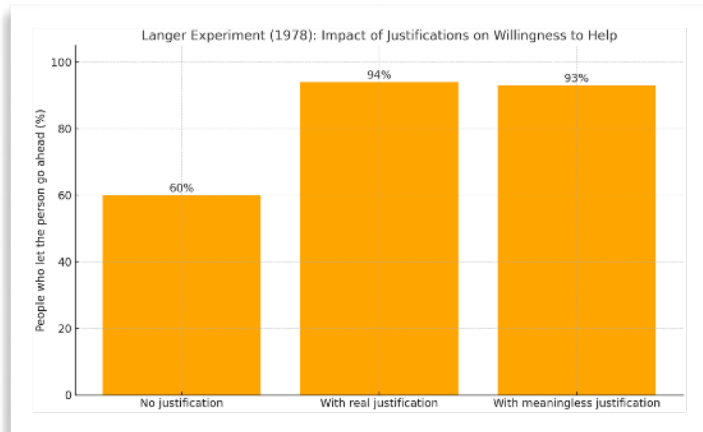
Source: Christian Rook, original painting: Alex Gross

And this impulse is so strong that we'll accept explanations even when they're clearly meaningless – as long as they sound like explanations.

The Copy Machine Study

The legendary copy machine study by psychologist Ellen Langer (Harvard, 1978) illustrates this perfectly:

A test subject approaches a long line at a copier and asks, “Excuse me, may I go ahead, because I need to make some copies?”



Even though that’s not a real reason – everyone in the line wants to make copies – over 90% of people let her go ahead.

Why? Because the structure “because I...” triggers an automatic response in our brains. It sounds like logic – even when it’s not.

So we treat it as if it were true.

And that’s exactly what happens in companies – or in press conferences at the White House, or aboard Air Force One.

Bad decisions are accepted, as long as they sound good. Or good enough. Failures go unchallenged, as long as someone tells a nice round story.

A transformation project is shut down “because the market isn’t ready.”

Very few people actually check – but it sounds plausible. And often, that’s enough.

The Human Lie Detector

The irony is: humans are biologically designed to detect lies. For thousands of years, this was crucial for survival.

Who’s lying?
Who’s telling the truth?
Who can I trust?

This ability is hardwired into our bodies – in our limbic system, our mirror neurons, and our autonomic nervous system.

When someone lies – or when a statement doesn’t feel right – our system reacts instantly: Cortisol, the stress hormone, is released.

The sympathetic nervous system kicks in: our pulse quickens, our breathing changes, we scan the other person.

The amygdala evaluates the situation for danger. And often, our gut quietly whispers: “Something’s off.”

This gut feeling isn’t esoteric – it’s neurologically explainable.

The **somatic marker**, as Antonio Damasio calls it, is a physical warning signal.

We feel uncertainty before we can even name it.

But this sensory system only works in real, human contact.

In the digital world – or in organizations with a “well-managed version of the truth” – it gets overridden.

We don’t see facial expressions. We don’t hear tone.

We don’t feel contradiction.

We just hear a plausible story. And too often, that’s enough.

Lie like it is 1899

We used to say, “Lies have short legs.”

Today, they have high-speed internet.

The German phrase “*lügen wie gedruckt*” – literally “to lie as if it were printed” – comes from the 19th century, when printed words still mostly equaled truth.

But even then, people suspected: If someone can write with that much conviction, they can lie with it, too.

Today, we experience this in real time – and it’s much worse.

Donald Trump, during his presidency, spread thousands of falsehoods – often faster than fact-checkers could respond.

His chief ideologue, Steve Bannon, famously called it “**flooding the zone**” – overwhelming people with so much chaos that they just seek shelter.

There’s no time left for critical questions.

Artificial intelligence creates perfect **deepfakes**, fabricated **speeches**, **manipulated images**.

Social media multiplies any lie in milliseconds.

Modern lying **isn’t clumsy** – it’s **professional**.

It’s engineered for impact. It appeals to our emotions, not our logic.

And that’s what makes it so dangerous.

Because if everything looks equally real – **how can we still tell what’s true and what’s false?**

The Outside Perspective

That’s why, now more than ever, we sometimes need an outsider.

In private life – and in companies going through transition.

Someone who doesn't nod along and cheer when someone says, "Did you hear that? Unbelievable, right?"

Someone who hasn't been infected by the tribe.

Someone who hasn't been socialized into the internal narratives.

Someone who hasn't drunk the proverbial corporate Kool-Aid.



Someone who hasn't been absorbed by the culture – and who has no interest in protecting certain stories or maintaining loyalties.

To this day, the definition of corporate culture varies widely.

Personally, I follow **Edgar Schein**, who wrote in 2010, paraphrased:

“Organizational culture consists of the shared behavioral patterns that have developed over time, proven effective, and are passed on to new members as the correct way to think, feel, and act.”

That's why companies don't just need transformation managers with methods, experience, and structure – they need something rarer: **fresh perception**.

Someone who asks the questions others no longer dare to ask.

Someone who hears contradictions that others no longer notice.

Someone who has the freedom to say what others only think.

Especially in organizations where the truth is hard to grasp, this function is essential for survival.

Our instincts don't fail because they're weak.

They fail because we suppress them.

Because we prefer harmony over truth.

Because we'd rather wrap things up quickly than look too closely.

But especially in times of uncertainty, change, and disinformation, we need to reclaim the ability to sense, to question, and to leave things open.

Not everything needs an immediate answer.

But everything needs attention.

Because the one who can still distinguish between what is true – and what only looks like truth – is the true leader of tomorrow.

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