

# Intelligent Business

## Before you read

This text, *On lying* by Bagehot from the *Economist* on 30 June 2009, is about politics but it contains ideas which are also important for anyone who works in business. *Bagehot* is not the real name of the author, it is a pen name. It refers to Walter Bagehot (1826-1877), a famous writer about constitutions.

In order to understand the text, you may need some extra information about the people he mentions and some parliamentary procedures.

**Gordon Brown** is the Prime Minister and leader of the Labour Party. **David Cameron** is the leader of the Conservative Party and the Leader of the Opposition in parliament. **Tony Blair** was the Prime Minister before Gordon Brown. **Ed Balls** is one of the Ministers in the Gordon Brown Government.

**PMQs** refers to **Prime Minister's Questions**, a regular weekly event in the House of Commons, when members of parliament can ask questions for the Prime Minister to answer.

The words 'lie' and 'liar' cannot be used in the House of Commons because they are considered impolite.

## Discuss

People in business tell a lot of lies when talking to their colleagues, competitors, suppliers and customers. Lies are often used in business but are they acceptable? A lot of success in business is based on trust. If people discover you are telling lies, will they continue to trust you and your company?

## On lying

THE WORD "lie" means something very specific. It doesn't mean a misleading statement, or an exaggeration, or a half-truth: it is a falsehood advanced intentionally and knowingly. That is why, in my column last week, I wrote that probably only Tony Blair and his crew could know whether they "lied" about Iraq's weapons of mass destruction. Only they can know what was in their heads, and how far their public utterances diverged from their inner convictions. For that reason the question of lying over Iraq seems to me a bit of a red herring and distraction. What can be proved about their sloppiness and embellishments, and has been, is bad enough.

Lying is back in the news this week. Gordon Brown stands accused by various newspapers and columnists of deliberately misleading the public about the government's fiscal position. Ditto Ed Balls, the prime minister's henchman, who evidently doesn't take kindly to having his integrity impugned in this way. David Cameron is a bit more periphrastic, knowing that in



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political parlance the "I" word is a nuclear accusation; but he came pretty close to it yesterday with his talk of "a thread of dishonesty" running through Mr Brown's premiership.

There are (at least) two big questions provoked by this revived interest in lying. First and most obviously, are Mr Brown, Mr Balls and others really and indisputably liars? Do the fiscal figures they cite and twist in any way support the interpretation they put on them—at least enough to make it credible that they believe what they are saying, even if no-one else does? If so, they may not be lying. They may be over-optimistic, incompetent or deluded. But they are not obviously liars.

Second, if he thinks it, should Mr Cameron say it? Why beat around the bush?

On the first: I agree that the government's selective use of figures, fondness for comparing like with unlike, switching between cash and real-terms numbers for spending, etc, are dodgy and dishonourable. That is bad enough. But are the ministers lying? It seems to me that one potential reason to think they are not is their own self-perception. Just as medieval peasants in France could not imagine a universe without god—such an idea was not within their range of thinkable thoughts—it is possible that Mr Brown and others simply cannot countenance the scale of the hole they have helped to dig, and in particular find it hard to accept that, in the unlikely event they win the election, they will have to impose the sort of public-spending cuts they have spent their entire political careers berating. (I am trying to be charitable.) Alternatively, there may be a plan for big tax rises, as yet unannounced, that will help to substantiate their claims on spending. That would be a form of deception too, but a different one.

On the second question: On the one hand, if Mr Cameron thinks it, he should say it. But on the other, he has to take Mr Brown on (at PMQs, on the television, in adverts) for almost another year. If he levels one of the gravest charges possible at him now, where does he go afterwards? The risk is that he will look like an actor who comes on ranting in the first act and then has no higher range to work through in the subsequent ones. There is also the danger that he comes across as bullying and downright rude.

What do you think?



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## Comprehension 1

### A Read the first paragraph carefully and complete the sentences.

1. You are lying if you ...
  - a. say something which is incorrect.
  - b. say something which is incorrect, even when you know it is incorrect.
  - c. say something which is incorrect, when you believe it is correct.
2. The writer believes that ...
  - a. Tony Blair lied about weapons of mass destruction in Iraq.
  - b. Tony Blair believed what he said about weapons of mass destruction in Iraq.
  - c. Only Tony Blair can say whether he lied or not.
3. The writer believes that Tony Blair tried to make the public believe ...
  - a. something which he did not believe.
  - b. exactly what he, himself, believed.
  - c. something which was eventually proved to be untrue.

### B Read the second paragraph carefully and complete the sentences.

1. Gordon Brown has been accused of lying about the government's fiscal position ...
  - a. by Ed Balls.
  - b. by David Cameron.
  - c. by the media.
2. Ed Balls ...
  - a. works for the Prime Minister.
  - b. supports David Cameron.
  - c. supports Tony Blair.
3. Ed Balls ...
  - a. says Gordon Brown is lying.
  - b. is angry that people say he is lying.
  - c. is unkind to Gordon Brown.



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4. David Cameron ...
- has accused Gordon Brown of lying.
  - has not accused Gordon Brown of lying.
  - has accused Ed Balls of lying to Gordon Brown.

## Comprehension 2

**C** In the next two paragraphs Bagehot presents two questions. Read the questions below. What are the two questions which Bagehot asks.

- Are Mr Brown and Mr Balls trying to mislead the public in their interpretation of fiscal data?
- Is the fiscal data published by the government really true?
- Would it be sensible for Mr Cameron to speak clearly and say Mr Brown is a liar?
- Why do many people think Mr Brown is lying even if he believes what he is saying?
- Should Mr Brown change his fiscal policy?

**D** Read the rest of the article. Which of the following statements are true?

- The government have used data selectively in a dishonourable way.
- Medieval peasants in France could not believe in a world in which God did not exist.
- It is possible that the government believe their own lies.
- The government are likely to win the next election.
- The government may be planning to cut taxes after the next election.
- The government may be planning to cut public spending after the next election.
- If Mr Cameron says Mr Brown is lying he might appear to be an impolite bully.



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## Vocabulary

**E** Look at the words in the box below. Some of the words are connected with lying, some are connected with believing. Some of the words are not connected with lying or believing. Make two lists under the headings LIE and BELIEVE.

ranting	deception	perception	accept	charitable	dodgy
deluded	incompetent	credible	twist	dishonest	embellishment
specific	exaggeration	half-truth	falsehood	knowingly	conviction
accused	sloppiness	selective	integrity	mislead	utterances

**F** Look carefully at the words in *italics*. Complete the sentences.

- 1) If you *mislead* someone, you ...
  - a) try to make them believe something which is not true.
  - b) accuse them of lying.
  - c) suggest they cannot do their job.
  
- 2) If you *exaggerate* something, you ...
  - a) tell them something which is not true.
  - b) suggest that something is more important than it really is.
  - c) try to distract them.
  
- 3) If someone attacks your *integrity*, they ...
  - a) accuse you of telling a lie.
  - b) suggest you are incompetent.
  - c) suggest that you are dishonest.



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- 4) If you *twist* some data, you ...
- a) suggest the data can be interpreted in a different way.
  - b) change the numbers to match your interpretation.
  - c) suggest the data is unreliable.
- 5) If you *beat around the bush*, you ...
- a) speak in a rude and impolite way.
  - b) tell people things which you know are untrue.
  - c) do not say what you really believe.
- 6) If someone accuses you of *sloppiness*, they suggest ...
- a) you do not work carefully.
  - b) you are dishonest.
  - c) you are not charitable.
- 7) If you are *deluded*, you ...
- a) believe things which are not true.
  - b) do not believe what people tell you.
  - c) depressed and pessimistic.
- 8) A *half-truth* is ...
- a) an embellishment.
  - b) information which is partly true and partly untrue.
  - c) information which is unbelievable.
- 9) If you are *periphrastic*, you ...
- a) always talk about side issues avoiding the key question.
  - b) always believe people are trying to cheat you.
  - c) always speak clearly and directly.
- 10) If you think a piece of data is *dodgy*, you think it ...
- a) can be interpreted in different ways.
  - b) it is incorrect.
  - c) is unreliable.



## Language work

**G** Write a sentence about your life or work which ...

1. Exaggerates the truth.
2. Describes one of your convictions.
3. Describes something which you perceive.
4. Tells a half-truth.
5. Twists the facts.
6. Is specific.
7. Is charitable about someone else.
8. Is a complete lie.
9. Is designed to mislead the reader.
10. demonstrates your integrity.



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## Teacher's Notes & Key

This article is quite difficult, partly because of the language, partly because of the need for background information, but largely because it requires careful, thoughtful and precise comprehension.

Although the subject matter is politics rather than business, it is easy to see the relevance of the topic and language to the business context.

A 1b, 2c, 3b,

B 1c, 2a, 3b, 4b,

C a], c]

D a], b], c], f], g]

E LIE: deception, dodgy, twist, dishonest, embellishment, exaggeration, half-truth, falsehood, knowingly, selective, mislead

BELIEVE: accept, deluded, credible, conviction, integrity

F 1a, 2b, 3c, 4a, 5c, 6a, 7a, 8b, 9a, 10c.

G Open answers

