



BEING RELATIONAL

**The Seven Ways
to Quality Interaction
& Lasting Change**

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Chapter 6

Being Clear

In looking at what goes into being grounded in reality, we focused on our thinking and being rigorous about truth. Being grounded means that you are conscious of thoughts that lead you to believe things that might not be true or, at the very least, to believe things that you do not *know* to be true. Being clear is also being rigorous about truth, but in a different way. It has to do with *how you share information* with others, or don't share information as the case may be.

Exchanging information is one of the most important aspects of human interaction, particularly when you want to work together with another person, to collaborate, or even merely to engage in simple transactions. Any of the hundreds of books on effective negotiation will tell you that your ability to ask the right questions, listen effectively, and get information from others is key to success. The question, from a relational standpoint, is how do you *share*

information with others? What guides you in your decisions to share information or not share it, how much or how little to disclose, and how you use or don't use ambiguity to your advantage?

Being clear might be boiled down to the old adage, "Honesty is the best policy," but is it really that simple? It's all about *transparency*, to use the modern term, and, as with all aspects of being relational, there is much to explore on the ways of being relational as we focus on being clear. There are many factors to consider when looking hard at the ethics of disclosure, non-disclosure, and information sharing. What level of truthfulness and disclosure is ethical, practical, and relational? Or, coming at the issue from the other direction, *Is it ever relational to tell a lie?* When is deception acceptable?

There are a myriad of scenarios to consider, but, with some very limited exceptions, you will know that you are *not* being clear when:

- You intentionally provide false information to another person about something important.
- You receive a request from another person who clearly deserves a response and you answer with silence.
- You use clever words to provide information that is so vague or general that it has no value to the other person.
- You provide information that is intentionally incomplete or evasive in response to requests.
- You routinely bluff and make false threats or demands.
- You make false statements that are unverifiable in order to gain competitive advantage in negotiations.
- You make false statements in order to garner the alignment of others to your side, your view.

- You are sarcastic or use pointed ‘kidding.’
- You are false whenever being truthful might cast you in a bad light.
- You exaggerate claims to a degree where your exaggeration is clear but the truth underlying your statement is not.

You want others to be honest with you. Like so many things, looking at it solely from your own perspective, considering what you need from another person, you don’t consider what they might need. Being clear means that you consider *both* your needs *and* the needs of the other person when you exchange information. How you get and give information can be complicated, and maybe even legally dicey, when you overthink it and try to gain power or a bargaining advantage. So, if you want to be relational, get clear on being clear.

Being clear means that you consider *both* your needs *and* the needs of the other person when you exchange information.

How clear do you want to be? *Crystal clear*. Let’s see why.

Being Clear is an Ethic Essential to Healthy Society

Unlike other aspects of being relational that we have discussed so far, being clear calls us to consider behaviors that have been the source of debate for centuries in the field of negotiation ethics. It is specifically part of the moral foundation of many religious traditions including Judaism and Christianity. The Eighth Commandment says, “Thou shalt not bear false witness . . .” In terms of law, virtually all societies consider fraud—harm caused by

intentional misrepresentation of material facts—criminally reprehensible. Accusing another of being a “liar” is a serious charge and one that uniformly incites an emotional response. Truthfulness is taken seriously by anyone who deals with others in any context. Your truthfulness or lack thereof is a character trait that powerfully defines you in the eyes of others and in how you view yourself. You need to be deliberate and conscious about any way in which you might compromise truthfulness for any reason.

Truth in our dealings with others is fundamental to our ability to function as a society. Where truth becomes questionable, trust evaporates.

Truth in our dealings with others is fundamental to our ability to function as a society. Where truth becomes questionable, trust evaporates. Imagine a community,

a workplace, or family where you could not trust any information that you received from others, where you had to confirm and verify any statement that you relied upon. It would grind to a halt. That is hard to conceive though, isn't it? Truthfulness mostly is taken for granted. Everyone in any functioning community needs to have some confidence that the information that they receive from others is essentially true. *The liar is the exception and he trades on that very fact*—that others will assume he is truthful in his dealings. Being the exception gives power to his lies. So, being clear means that you care a lot about being truthful in your dealings with others because that is also what you expect from them.

The challenge for you as a winner, however, is that you are used to getting what you want in negotiations with others. You have been trained to compete, and deception often gives you a competitive advantage. That is part of winning in a transactional world.

Someone asks you a difficult question and you hedge or even outright lie to keep from disclosing truthful information that might weaken you. You give information that is truthful, but you leave out damaging facts. You let another person base their decision on limited or false information when you know that if they had complete and truthful information they might make a different decision. You do these things for various reasons. You are afraid you won't get what you want. You don't want to look weak or stupid or lazy or careless. You do it for self-preservation and protection of your desired image in the eyes of others. Or, you are just not up for being fully engaged with another person on a difficult or potentially embarrassing topic and so you take the easy way out. And, in a commercial context, you do it for money—to get more, or to spend less. That is just how everyone plays the game, right?

Maybe, maybe not. It depends on your worldview and your sense of *ethics* appropriate to interactions with others. The field of ethics studies human behavior and seeks to define what is right and good behavior according to a defined standard. That standard has a moral component, influenced mainly by religious tradition, but it also is influenced by what is culturally accepted, what is practical and effective, what is considered worthy of criminal punishment under law, or what might prompt a governing professional organization to impose some form of sanction.

Ethical standards differ between individuals, organized groups, communities, ethnic groups, and cultures. It is easy to get lost in trying to identify a guiding principle to help you decide what is or is not ethical. You probably have some sense of your ethical standards with regard to truthfulness, but you may not be fully deliberate about it. You might be making it up as you go along, partaking

in the behavior that best serves the situation as it arises. But that just seems too random, doesn't it? What is your guiding principle?

Here is a good starting point: *Consider the perspective of the other person, the one with whom you are exchanging information.*

Being relational calls us to focus both on self and other. A deception that might seem reasonable to the deceiver will look very dif-

Deception is in essence coercive.

ferent through the eyes of the person who is deceived. Why is that? Because deception is in essence coercive. No one wants to be coerced into doing or not doing something. Coercion

destroys consent. Coercion uses power to achieve its ends. In that way it is neither kind, nor generous as we will discuss later. If a person would, or even might, make a different choice based upon the deception, then the deception has imposed the will of the deceiver upon the deceived. You can be sure that the deceived does not want to be manipulated, even though the deceiver might honestly believe the deception is fair and justified.

So the first step in being clear is to look at the situation from the perspective of the other and ask yourself, "*If I were in their shoes would the deception seem reasonable? Is it within the bounds of fairness?*" It is not easy to think of situations where someone would expect you to be deceitful and think it was fair and reasonable. What comes to mind for you? Anything?

Being Clear About Your Ethics Of Disclosure

Taking a look at the ethics of disclosure from the perspective of the other person, you see that, ethically, there is a difference between forms of behavior. Some are more problematic

than others. Fraud, for instance, is ethically worse than failing to disclose minor facts or being silent in response to requests for information. Surely, the person on the wrong end of fraud doesn't consider it reasonable or within the bounds of fairness. There is a choice of behaviors related to disclosure, ranging from criminal, to intentionally deceitful, to aggressively competitive, to merely annoying, and finally, to saintly and, some would say, unduly idealistic. You want to know where you are on that spectrum and, at the very least, be conscious and deliberate about your choices as you move around (and possibly down) the spectrum.

So, emphasizing the positive, let's start with what might be called the ***Golden Rule ethical position***. When a person wants information from you, what would be ideal *for them*?

The ideal for them is for you to *volunteer all information* that you have that might be relevant to their decisions, for all information that you give to be true, and for you to make sure that they fully understand every piece of information that you share with them. From this ethical point on the spectrum, you are making the other person's job in dealing with you as easy as possible. They don't have to ask any questions, but you welcome any questions they ask and respond fully and honestly. They don't have to probe for information. In fact, you work to find out what information they might need for their informed decision-making by asking them questions to explore their needs and desires. They can rely on everything you say, and you might even go to the trouble of providing the evidence and proof necessary for them to have complete confidence in all of your representations. You share with them your analysis of the options and fairness of them. In a commercial context, you might even share your information about cost and

expected levels of profit. Furthermore, as information is shared, you make sure that they fully understand it. You use reflections and summaries to ensure clear communication. You even offer to help them with their analysis and decision-making, helping them to test options to ensure that they feel that any decision they make is fully informed and freely made without coercion of any kind. You want to ensure that they have the benefit of all the information you have. This is a generous and kind approach. So when is it a good approach to take?

Maybe not always, but more than you might think. In an interpersonal context, who would not appreciate the Golden Rule treatment from another person? It builds relationship and trust. It leads to agreements that are durable, less likely to break down. Of course, it is not relevant in simple exchange transactions for very small amounts—nobody expects to negotiate the price of an ice cream cone, but you might want to know how many calories it has or what the ingredients are. Information affects your deci-

Information affects your decisions and so you give others information in the same way that you would want to get it.

sions and so you give others information in the same way that you would want to get it. In a commercial context, sellers practicing the Golden Rule ethic generally have

happy customers. But in matters of higher stakes business and in our transactional relations with others, there is a problem, isn't there? This approach means you might not get the best deal in a transaction, doesn't it? No matter how you slice it, this approach will cost you *money*. It will hurt your profitability. Right?

Maybe, maybe not. Literally hundreds of business books are built on this premise—that business is a competitive game and you

play to win the biggest share of the pie that you ethically can. If you are a player, on behalf of a company that you don't own, your employer expects you to play the game to win. Where you are on the ethical spectrum of disclosure plays a big part in that game. Playing the game according to the Golden Rule ethic means that you are not going to take advantage of any information that *you* know that the other side does *not* know—“*information asymmetry*” as it is referred to in negotiation strategy texts. So, they get to decide the terms on which they will do business with you and they ultimately might be able to decide how much profit they make and you make in the bargain. That doesn't sound good, does it?

The Golden Rule ethic means that you are not going to take advantage of any information that *you* know that the other side does *not* know—“*information asymmetry.*”

But proceeding according to the Golden Rule ethic doesn't mean you are a doormat or in any way a loser. You are grounded and, in setting healthy boundaries, you know that you have options. You can walk away. You can request a facilitated dialogue with the assistance of a mediator in a process that can provide confidentiality and disclosure safeguards. You can tell them what you think is fair and why. You can ask questions seeking full disclosure from them. You can work to verify information that you get. You can be firm in asking for what you want and what you think is right and just. You are willing to do the work necessary to be able to explain and justify your requests. The consequence of practicing this ethic is that you will likely succeed in situations where it is not necessary to deceive the other side in order to gain a positive outcome for yourself. Stated another way, the consequence of practicing this ethic is that you will

not succeed in situations where it is necessary to deceive the other side in order to gain a positive outcome for yourself.

Is success valuable where it requires you to use the coercive power of deception? Simply put, in all but the most difficult dilemmas, some of which we will discuss below, being deceptive is not being relational.

You might be saying, “Yeah, but you are asking me to play by an entirely new set of rules, and I am just not ready to volunteer everything I know to the other side.” So maybe you want to move down on the ethical spectrum a bit. That is okay. It doesn’t mean that you have to start being deceptive. There are ways that you can engage with others and share information that may not meet the Golden Rule standard, but are nonetheless not deceptive. But you have to be very careful in going down this path because it is, as they say, a slippery slope.

Let’s start with *compromising on the idea of volunteering information*. There is no deception involved where you conceal nothing and are always truthful, but you only provide information that is requested. It just requires the other side to work and ask questions. That puts the burden on them to ask the right questions in order to get all the information they need. You might hope that they won’t ask a critical question that would lead you to reveal information that weakens your position. Think for a moment of situations where you did not get an important piece of information that would have changed your decision because you failed to ask. If you take a moment you can probably come up with many of them—situations where things did not work out as you expected and there was a piece of information that you wished you had asked for, such as when you were excited about buying a new home and you didn’t

ask about the noise level on weekends, or the neighbors who fight all the time, or the restricted ordinances or covenants. Putting the information-gathering burden upon the other person is not always fair. Your everyday experience confirms this. Laws and rules that require disclosure of essential facts important to consumer decision-making govern commerce in just about any product or service. So, in being clear, while it might not technically be deceptive to decline to volunteer facts, you nonetheless make sure that the other person has material information, the information critical to their decision, especially if you can't reasonably expect them to ask for it. That applies in all contexts, personal as well as commercial. At the right time, you might have to disclose a personal secret, as we will discuss below.

You may draw the line and decide that there is some information that you can fairly declare off limits for disclosure. Again you have to be very careful about this because you may end up withholding information that

You may draw the line and decide that there is some information that you can fairly declare off limits for disclosure.

would cause the other person to make a different choice in dealing with you. If they make an information request that you consider out of bounds, asking you to reveal confidential information or information that you feel is truly "none of their business," then you explain to them why it is a question you won't answer. For instance, if you own an auto repair shop and a customer asks you how much you pay your mechanics as an hourly wage, you might answer that your wage rates for workers, while relevant to the customer's interest in making sure that the markup on service work is not too high, is proprietary to your business and something you choose

not to disclose. If the customer does not like your response then they can choose to go elsewhere with their business. You may lose a customer but you won't resort to using deception.

Similarly, *you don't stonewall with silence* when information is requested. Silence usually isn't deceptive, but it is also rarely helpful to the other person. Stonewalling will inflame the suspicion of the other person. It is likely to make them assume the worst. Stone-

Stonewalling is a sign of disrespect and disregard for the other person's interest in getting information.

walling is a sign of disrespect and disregard for the other person's interest in getting information. It is simply bad practice and escalates conflict. It can also be a form of bullying, which we

will discuss later. Being relational means you are engaged, you don't stonewall. At the very least, rather than remain silent, you can respond to a request for information with a statement explaining why you can't or don't want to provide the information requested. "Thanks, sir. I am not inclined to do that, but I will consider it and get back to you before the end of the week."

Moving further down the ethical spectrum there is a wide range of *competitive negotiation behavior*. Being clear means that you *don't* engage in it even if it might be expedient, with very few exceptions as discussed below. You don't use *clever words* to say things that might sound good, but are so vague or incomplete as to be almost meaningless. That, unfortunately, is the tactic of many politicians and what might be called "lawyer talk." You hear it every day—big broad statements or carefully hedged positions, couched in opinion but sounding like fact; persuasive statistics that appear to support a conclusion, but which have a questionable basis in reality. Statements that might, if they are carefully parsed,

technically be true, but which imply something that is not true. Tactics of debate and rhetoric that seek to shade, hide, and obfuscate the truth. Anytime you are trying to persuade others, hoping that they will believe something that you know is not based in reality and which omits facts that, if made clear, would cast things in a very different light, you are manipulating and coercing them. That's not relational. Coercion is force and an abuse of power as we will discuss ahead in connection with being kind.

Likewise, you don't make *exaggerated claims* with the idea that your exaggeration is so obvious that it can't be taken seriously. This is referred to as "puffing" and even if it might be considered harmless or even expected in a negotiation, it seeks to influence the behavior of another person with information that is not true. They do not know where the truth stops and the exaggeration begins in your statement. The same holds true with bluffing, false threats, sarcasm, and deception related to your bottom line.

Once you go down the path of deception, you have broken your relation to the other person. You are no longer in the realm of quality interaction and dialogue and you are headed for a crisis in your interaction with them. Which leads us to the next reason for being clear—in the end, it is not only better for them if you are clear, it is also better for *you*.

Being Clear is a Better Way for You

Practicing deception often does more harm to you than it does to the person you seek to deceive. It may seem to give you an advantage

Practicing deception often does more harm to you than it does to the person you seek to deceive.

in the short run, helping you get something that you want, but at a high cost. Once you deceive, you have walked the plank. You have put the noose on your own neck. First, there is damage to your own personal sense of integrity. As a winner, you view yourself as a person who is worthy of respect. When you deceive others, you risk losing your self-respect. You look in the mirror and see a person you don't like.

Maybe you don't care. Maybe you feel that your behavior is justified because "everybody does it," or it is "how the game is played," or it is for a "higher, more important, purpose." Perhaps you feel that you have the power to deceive others because there is nothing they can do about it. But think about what the falsehood does to you. Now you have to be very careful about how you deal with the other person. You may have to weave deception on top of your deception in order to prevent discovery of the original falsehood. Lies beget lies as they say. You need to keep track of what you have represented to the other person, how it differs from reality, and how you can ensure it is not discovered. You have to keep track of the other deceptions you have to put forth in order to prop up the first deceit. It is usually a losing battle, especially if you deal with the person often and the falsehood is about something important. In the very least you have to exert great energy being very careful about your misrepresentations, very clever to make sure that they are statements that can't be verified. It's time consuming. It's stressful. Is it really worth it?

What if the falsehood is discovered? You have done great damage to your reputation. You now have a person who no longer trusts you and who will deal with you differently going forward. You need to do a lot of repair work to put the relationship back

on track. You will need forgiveness, and their kindness might not extend far enough for them to offer that to you. The relationship may be broken forever as the other simply chooses no longer to associate with you. That can be devastating in personal contexts like family and marital relations. In commerce, you probably have lost a customer or a vendor. They are likely to move on to the next person they can do business with. And there are usually others who are also adversely impacted by the deceit, breach of trust, and resulting fracture. Each loss weakens the strength of the system, whether that is the family, the enterprise, or the community.

You have also hurt yourself in the sense that you have damaged the level of trust that exists in the community that you are part of. Your deception may prompt others to be deceptive in retaliation or because they now think it necessary behavior in a corrupt society. You have participated in making the community just a little more coarse, a little more dog-eat-dog, and indirectly you contribute to your own suffering. It is easy to see how this applies to important relationships. This also applies even where, in a random, anonymous transaction, you have deceived someone whom you will never deal with again. So, without regard for the other, merely for your own sake, you can see that being clear is vital to your health and well-being.

Dilemmas in Being Clear

Despite our best intentions and desire for personal integrity, however, life poses dilemmas to us, situations where deception might seem the right and moral choice. Ethicists have devoted much thought to these situations, weaving elaborate hypotheticals

to test moral constructs related to truthfulness.⁹ We can't begin to address them all here, but we would like you to consider a few. In being relational, it is important to look at these situations because, as discussed above, allowing any deception to enter into your interactions with others is very risky. We want to help you be conscious and deliberate when and if you ever choose to stray from the Golden Rule ethic.

The classic dilemma involves *deception in the face of evil*. The evil party seeks information from you. The information you provide could aid them in their efforts to do evil. Silence might be an option, but often it is not because it would betray another innocent person. Silence might also expose you to grave harm. Time is of the essence. There is no real opportunity for dialogue. Nazi storm troopers come to your door searching for Jews, one of whom is hidden in your attic. Silence would be an admission. A lie is necessary to protect your friend. So you deceive and you are successful. You take a risk to protect someone who was innocent, and yourself as well. You've done a good thing.

But most circumstances are not so narrow and clear cut. First, you have to be sure that you are indeed dealing with others who have evil intentions. Second, there is no time for dialogue. Third, you have to be sure that your truthfulness would aid evil. Fourth, silence is not an option. Each of these criteria is difficult to satisfy. Being clear means that you consider them carefully before you engage in deception.

First, evil is often in the eye of the beholder. Remember negative triangling, demonizing others to build coalitions, and its

⁹ See e.g. Augustine, St. "On Lying" and "Against Lying," in R.J. Deferrari, ed., *Treatises on Various Subjects* (New York, 1952).

destructive power in communities. You are careful not to judge another as justly deserving deception simply because you judge that they belong to a group of which you are suspicious. Certainly it's not okay for Democrats to lie to Republicans, or vice versa, just because of policy disagreements even if the feeling is that some in the other group are truly evil. Being grounded, you are very careful whom you label as "evil."

But sometimes you are not sure about their intentions. You might suspect that they have bad motives and think that the safest course is to treat them as if they are evil until you know better. Fundamentally it is a question of trust. Better safe than sorry as they say. However using deception is rarely safe as we discussed above. *So when in doubt and when time allows, you take the first step in being relational: you engage.* You ask questions. You listen carefully. You reflect what they said using their words. You get information. You are present, attentive, and interested in them. Sometimes the pressure of time and the level of perceived threat from the other will affect your judgment here. Is there a threat of imminent harm? Deception to prevent harm when you have a gun in your face is obviously appropriate. But the use of deception just because you think that the other might have a gun, or might get one in the future, is different. Since deception is a use of coercive power, as with any use of power, being relational calls you to prefer dialogue and use coercive forms of power only as a last resort.

Next, consider whether truthfulness will truly aid the evil or whether it is just to serve your idea of a better course. Using

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deception to serve a “higher purpose” that you believe in is not deception to prevent giving aid to evil. For instance, it’s not okay to distort facts in order to gain approval of others for some course

It’s not okay to distort facts in order to gain approval of others for some course of action just because you think that course is the right path.

of action just because you think that course is the right path. Think “weapons of mass destruction are stockpiled in Iraq” and therefore the United States needs to invade.

This deception is a shortcut, a lazy way of trying to build consensus. It is contrary to all notions of informed decision-making through quality dialogue. Yes, there are situations where secrets need to be kept in order to ensure security. You don’t reveal your ATM pin number to anyone, right? You have no duty to reveal information to anyone who has no legitimate interest in knowing it. But again, deception is a last resort.

Most of the time in a difficult situation, *silence is an option*. Silence rarely reveals anything. In order for silence to reveal information, the inquiry has to call for a yes or no answer, and the person seeking information has to assume that you are acting out of self-interest. As we discussed with regard to stonewalling, when a response to a question is silence, the questioner will usually assume the worst. So, to choose a mundane example, if the question is “Did you do the dishes?” Silence means no. Or, in a relationship, “Are you cheating on me?” Silence means yes. In these examples, separated from the other elements of the Nazi storm trooper scenario, your best course is honesty and full disclosure according to the Golden Rule ethic. Usually there is at the very least the option to say, “I can’t say,” and explain why. Whenever possible, choose that option in lieu of choosing to deceive the other person.

When and if you do disclose, you are thoughtful about what you disclose, conscious of the impact that disclosure can have on yourself, the person seeking the information, and others not part of the conversation, but who will be affected by the disclosure. This brings us to a special category of dilemmas in disclosure—secrets and confidences.

Secrets and Confidences

When there is something about you or your past that you do not want to disclose to another person, you may decide to keep it a secret. Secrets are things about you that you withhold from disclosure. Confidences, however, are different from secrets. Confidences involve your keeping *another person's* secret or the secret of a group or organization of which you are part. For personal reasons, secrets might be difficult to deal with, but they do not necessarily pose great challenges for you in being clear. Confidences, on the other hand, can create dilemmas that are very thorny because they can put you in a position where you are torn between several conflicting interests, your self-interest, the interests of the person who wants to keep the secret, and the person from whom the secret is kept. Let's look at secrets and confidences a bit closer.

Confidences can create dilemmas that are very thorny because they can put you in a position where you are torn between several conflicting interests, your self-interest, the interests of the person who wants to keep the secret, and the person from whom the secret is kept.

You have secrets. Everyone does. You may keep them for a number of reasons that are perfectly justifiable. For instance, the details

about your sex life with your spouse is something that you might not want to disclose to others. Maybe you do. That is your business. If there is violence and abuse, it might become someone else's business, but normally it is not. Details about your habits in sleep, personal care, choice of reading material, and so on, are things that you might want to keep secret.

Privacy is an important value and essential to good society among people with widely different tastes, norms, and practices. Your discretion in creating boundaries around your personal thoughts and personal life, and your respect for the same boundaries created by others, help you to coexist peacefully in a crowded and hyper-connected world. Being relational, you are not a busybody and you expect others not to be busybodies.

Being clear means that you don't withhold a secret from another person when your failure to disclose the secret would hurt them.

But being clear means that you don't withhold a secret from another person when your failure to disclose the secret would hurt them. The physician's creed of "first, do no harm" applies.

You find the right time, place, and way to tell someone your secret if, considering their perspective and everything you know about them, you feel that they need to know your secret. That might be a complicated conversation that you want to have with a lot of care. Perhaps the other person does not want to know your secret. You can test that by asking them broadly, "Are there questions you have about my (health history, sex life, quirky habits, personal needs, family history, run-ins with the law, financial troubles, job losses, substance abuse, and so on)?" In most contexts these things might be totally out of bounds for general conversation, but in some they

might be critical—intimate personal relationships and the formation of business partnerships for instance. You might be surprised when someone says that they don't care to know.

Being clear means you don't use deception to coerce another person. It also means, as we discuss below about being gently honest, you don't allow your failures to become secrets by covering them up or hiding them when they happen. You disclose important information to others immediately as a rule. In this sense, your decision process in disclosing a secret is no different than other situations we have discussed in being clear. Unlike other situations, however, disclosure of your secrets might be particularly painful for you because it might cost you a relationship or cause embarrassment or humiliation. Being relational means caring for yourself and others so, in caring for yourself and in the context of the relationship, you might discern that keeping a long-held secret is best. You might discern that disclosure would hurt the other person and your relationship more than keeping the secret would. That is a choice you might make out of kindness to yourself and to them. That is your decision. Being relational means you make that decision very carefully.

You also are very careful about *how you deal with others' confidences*, the secrets you hold that are not yours alone. You may have a special role in relation to another that requires you to keep confidences absolutely confidential. If you have professional duties—lawyer, priest, doctor, therapist, or mediator for instance—you may be called to hold confidences even though you know that another

Being clear means you don't allow your failures to become secrets by covering them up or hiding them when they happen. You disclose important information to others immediately as a rule.

person, who does not know the secret, would very much want to know it. In these professional contexts very limited exceptions to confidentiality exist and the professional generally is called upon to disclose those exceptions before the person tells their secret to the professional. Think imminent threats of violence or serious criminal injury and elder or child abuse. Otherwise as a professional, you keep the confidence even if it might put you in an uncomfortable position of stating why you cannot address the situation even when you think it might be helpful to others to know. And if the confidence is about whether or not the professional relationship even exists, you keep the confidence even if it might put you in an uncomfortable position of having to evade inquiries or even resort to outright deception in order not to disclose the confidence. In the context of a special professional role, that might still be within the boundaries of being clear. As a professional, you make those judgment calls as part of your duty to the people whom you serve.

Confidences become more difficult however, when they are held in relationships that do not involve a special professional role—for instance when you serve as an employee or ordinary “rank and file” member of a group. It could be in your role as an employee, member of a family, member in an association or club, or in your role as John Doe, Citizen. In these roles you feel a general duty to be loyal to the group. You might also feel a personal obligation to hold secret from others certain things that you know about the organization that others do not know. When you believe that it is not right to keep certain information secret from others, you face a dilemma. Being relational, you may decide you must disclose. *How* you disclose is also part of being clear. You must decide whether or not to “blow the whistle.”

Whistleblowing is the much-debated¹⁰ situation where a person cries “foul” on an organization that they are a part of. It is a dilemma because the whistleblower is often torn in many directions—between:

Whistleblowing is the much-debated situation where a person cries “foul” on an organization that they are a part of.

- their own desire not to suffer retaliation;
- needs of others who might depend on the whistleblower as a family income provider’
- needs and reasons of the group in keeping the secret;
- the impact (positive and/or negative) that disclosure of the secret will have on members of the group that they are part of; and
- the impact (positive and/or negative) that disclosure of the secret will have on others who are outside of the group.

Needless to say, often the situation is complicated. So in being clear, you have to make some tough decisions. Loyalty is not the issue. That is an oversimplified perspective on the problem. No group can demand blind loyalty. That is facism. So, you weigh all of the interests involved. Being relational means *considering both self and other*. In the same way that blind loyalty is not the issue, neither is blind self-sacrifice, ignoring the consequences to yourself and others close to you. You have options; you look harder at them.

First, you consider where you are in the hierarchy of the group and the urgency of the need to disclose. If it exists, you go up the

¹⁰ See e.g. Bouville, Mathieu, *Whistle-blowing and Morality*, Institute of Materials Research and Engineering, Singapore 117602 (2007)

chain of authority to ask them to disclose the secret. You seek to persuade them about the importance of disclosure as you see it and, as we discuss below with regard to kindness, you use your power wisely. You engage by first listening to understand fully why the group does not want to disclose the secret. You stay centered and don't complain to try to build a harmful coalition; you don't negatively triangle. You go to those with responsibility for the decision. Imminently threatened serious harm might require you to go right to the top quickly, but you are grounded and look hard at whether the urgency you sense is just your rising internal reactivity or whether the stirring is a cue for something that is real and true. You may have more time to deal with the issue than at first you think you do.

As you engage with others in the group about whether or not disclosure of the secret is the best option, you regularly look at all the consequences for everyone involved. There are no simple rules here. The situation might be made more complicated when non-disclosure may bypass criminal consequences or increase the likelihood that bad behavior may occur again. The situation might be extreme—the disclosure might be a fatal blow to the organization, the threatened retaliation might be extreme, keeping the secret might result in severe harm to others. Hopefully you will never encounter a nightmare scenario. Being clear, being relational, just means that you make decisions consciously in a fully engaged, centered, and grounded way. You are discerning and proactive considering the consequences to the best of your ability.

You might decide to blow the whistle by going to an external authority—the press, police, and so on—if internal authorities are not responsive and you discern the need for disclosure is

paramount. If you do, you are prepared for the consequences and accept them. Some organizations have elaborate systems to encourage whistleblowing and to protect whistleblowers.¹¹ To us, these systems are good solutions for organizations and help reduce the whistleblower's dilemma. Even with protections, the whistleblower, however, may still suffer consequences. Being relational, you have thoughtfully considered the consequences and you accept them.

You may decide to leave the group and let the issue go. You may decide to stay within the group and let the issue go. Maybe not. That is your decision and being relational demands no particular outcome.

Being Gently Honest

Finally, there is the concept of gentle honesty. Being clear doesn't mean you are harsh with the truth. Kindness, or at least a desire to not be hurtful, guides you in sharing information. You are familiar with the concept of "white lies," untruths stated or allowed to exist in the interest of compassion for others. These fall into two categories of untruth: subjective and objective. The first category is not even deceptive most of the time. It involves your stating an opinion that is not one you truly hold. You might do this frequently to prevent hurting the feelings of someone you care about and most of the time it does not affect their decision-making.

For instance, at dinner your spouse might ask you, "How do you like this dish?" Your true opinion might be that you think it is okay but not great, or even that it is not good at all. In the interest

¹¹ See CRS Whistleblower procedure, <https://secure.ethicspoint.com/domain/media/en/gui/12748/whistle.pdf>.

of your relationship, however, you say, “It’s good, honey, thanks for making it.” You can think of a hundred similar examples and the point is that you are not being honest in the sense that you say exactly what you think in terms of your subjective opinion, but rather, in the context of your relationship with the other, you choose not to be harsh with your opinion. You think to yourself, *I am grateful for this meal and the hands that prepared it.* It does not involve any need for informed decision making.

As we discussed above with regard to the Golden Rule ethic, looking at the situation from the perspective of the other person, what would they more highly value, blunt honesty or a gentle “white lie?” Being relational, you decide this in the context of your relationship and what you know about the other person and their sensitivity. In some cases blunt honesty will be just fine. The other person may well appreciate it. They may have even asked you for it. You provide it from a place of center and groundedness, factual and not puffed up. In others, you know they will be more receptive to a gentle approach in giving them your true opinion or you may never express your true opinion at all. You may follow the advice of “If you have nothing good to say, don’t say anything at all.” In these situations you also ask yourself “*Am I being overly critical, stingy with my goodwill, or ungrateful; or, on the other hand, would my opinion give useful input to the other person that they would appreciate? Am I using my false opinion to try to coerce the other person, to get them to do or not do something that they might not otherwise do?*” If you are grounded, you will have this kind of inner conversation right in the moment. You may realize that you are using your false opinion just to avoid conflict. You avoided what could actually have been a healthy exchange and could have deepened your

relationship if you had known how to engage in it. Being gently honest means that, in giving your opinion, you consider the relationship context and you consider the power and influ-

ence you have. As we will discuss ahead, you are kind in how you use that power. That's not being deceptive.

On the other hand, misrepresentations about *factual* matters, even in the context of relationship, are deceptive even if your motives are compassion and care for others. Being clear means that you are very careful about factual untruths offered because you judge that others "can't handle the truth." A few examples illustrate how thorny this can be.

Grandma is fatally ill and you don't want to upset your children so you tell them that she is fine and will get better soon. She dies. Later they discover that you kept her fatal illness from them and they resent you for it. You thought you were being compassionate, but that is not how they see it.

Your mother suffers from dementia or Alzheimer's and she keeps asking you when her husband, your father, will be coming to see her. He has been dead for many years. You told her that once when she asked and she got very upset, re-experiencing real grief. She asks you again and you tell her, "I am sure he will be along sometime soon." Then you change the subject. She never discovers that you were not honest. Your deception is purely compassionate.

In both of the above examples the *compassionate justification* for your deception is grounded in your judgment about the lack of capacity in the other to cope effectively with the truth—first

Being gently honest means that, in giving your opinion, you consider the relationship context and you consider the power and influence you have.

because of young age and second because of mental illness. You have to make the judgment about whether in certain circumstances it is compassionate to be untrue. Being clear means you do so deliberately. You keep in mind the consequences of your lie of being discovered. In the Grandma scenario above, when the kids get older if they discover that they might have been able to spend more time with Grandma had they known the truth, or to tell Grandma that they loved her before she died, you really may have broken trust with them. They may wonder what else you deceived them about. You also must discern whether your deception is truly out of compassion for someone else or, on the other hand, whether it is out of your own self-interest, such as conflict avoidance, ego, or enabling.

For example, there is some fact that you believe will upset another person. You also believe that they do not know it. Maybe you have some responsibility for the situation. You did or didn't do something and you would rather they did not know about it. You betrayed them somehow. Maybe you have no responsibility at all like the Grandma or Alzheimer's scenarios above, but you just don't want to be part of experiencing the emotional scene that you expect to occur when the truth is revealed. Being clear means that you don't allow your interest in avoiding responsibility for

Being clear means that you don't allow your interest in avoiding responsibility for your actions, or your desire to avoid emotional scenes to justify deception in the name of being compassionate.

your actions, or your desire to avoid emotional scenes to justify deception in the name of being compassionate. This can be very difficult.

If you have responsibility, then being clear means you

take responsibility and accept the consequences of your actions. If you betrayed a spouse or lover with infidelity or even a business partner with disloyalty or failure in performance, you tell them the truth immediately and clearly. You don't even let the fact become a secret that you would have to live with and perhaps disclose later. Even though they might get upset, you know that any deception would only be a time bomb in your relationship waiting to blow up. And you can't be sure what their reaction will be. Being grounded tells you not to assume that you know what the future will hold. You may think that it is compassionate to withhold the truth, but in reality you are only doing so to dodge the consequences of your actions. So you don't do it.

Even if you don't have responsibility for the situation, being clear calls you to consider whom you are really serving with your "compassionate" deception. If you are just trying to avoid an emotional scene because it will upset and bother *you* and be difficult *for you* to deal with, then you are not being compassionate. You are being stingy with your emotional energy, your patience, and your care for others. No question, being in the middle of someone else's emotional pain is not easy or pleasant. It is an act of generosity, giving of yourself.

Truth telling is an essential part of being relational. Quality dialogue requires the exchange of truthful information. That may mean putting yourself into difficult conversations. When you engage from a place of center, you are grounded in reality and you are clear about your disclosure

When you engage from a place of center, you are grounded in reality and you are clear about your disclosure ethics, you are strong enough to be vulnerable. It takes courage.

ethics, you are strong enough to be vulnerable. It takes courage. But if you are engaged, if you enter and stay in the conversation, if you remain centered and grounded, and are clear, then you will be able to have amazing quality interactions and the kind of quality dialogue that will lead to breakthroughs, resolutions, reconciliation, and healing. From there, *you can go even further in creating lasting positive outcomes that reverberate, that are paid forward, that foster connection, reconciliation, peace, and justice.* You do that by being generous, humble, and kind.

Questions for Your Consideration

In exploring Being Clear, consider the following questions. If you are not sure about your answers, go back and visit the chapter.

- What is your approach to deciding whether or not to disclose information to another person that you think they would want to know, but that at the same time might upset or disturb them?
- What is your approach in deciding whether or not to disclose information to another person that you know they would want, but which might not be favorable to you?
- How does silence in response to a request for information create problems?
- Why is your ethical approach to disclosure important in your personal relationships, organization or community?
- When do you say “That’s none of your business?”—Or maybe a more diplomatic version of that, “I need a boundary here and do not want to share that information with you.” And why might you say that?

- What keeps you from fully disclosing important information?
- What is your approach to disclosure to others of your secrets?
- What are “white lies” and are they ever okay?
- What is your approach to whistleblowing and disclosure of confidences?