

Can You Be Trusted?

By [Harrison Barnes](#)

Can you be trusted?

This is more important than any other single question. Regardless of how motivated you are, regardless of where you went to school, regardless of your work history, if you slip up in this area, you might as well forget about a [good career](#) in any profession.

Certainly, there are many people who rise quickly by playing fast and loose with the rules. I've seen this more times than I can count during my career. Nevertheless, when all is said and done, no matter how far an individual gets, they almost always come crashing down if they are not trustworthy. When this happens, it's major. Careers end.

I used to teach professional responsibility at a [law school](#). In this class, like in most professional responsibility classes, we spent a lot of time going over the rules and debating various ethical questions. Personally, when I took this class in law school, I believed it was somewhat of a blow-off, just like most of my fellow students. However, this article is about the consequences of dishonesty, not a blow-off discussion of professional responsibility.

As a legal recruiter I have seen far too many careers stall out or end due to credibility lapses. This is more common than you might think. In fact, I would estimate at least five to ten percent of all careers in the [legal sector](#) experience long term, negative results because an attorney has done something dishonest, or not credible. When you probe the reasons why top attorneys from exceptional backgrounds do not get interviews or hired, it is most often because when their references are checked others believe they cannot be trusted. While some credibility lapses are obvious – for example, stealing client money or lying in court – most often the issues are far subtler. If an attorney shades the truth with superiors or does not make important information known to a client, the results can be disastrous to his or her career.

In the organizations in which I've been involved or run, the most persistent cause of failure is someone losing credibility. Once this happens, a person's career within an organization usually ends, and their lack of credibility ends up following them to their next job, and the next one after that, because people remember and people talk. I do not care if you screw up in a [law firm](#) in Chicago and then move to New York or Florida, wherever you go, the chances are very good that your past will follow you.

Can you be trusted? Once there is any doubt, you have lost a great deal.

Fortunes can be lost and rebuilt. Being fired for wrongdoings wherein your credibility was not an issue can eventually be forgotten. If you lose your credibility however, you may never regain it.

Credibility encompasses far more than you may realize. Paradoxically, it is almost always the most accomplished, aggressive, and talented people who seem to lose their credibility. Years of achievement can be ruined by one moment of poor judgment.

Credibility can be defined in many ways, but at its simplest, it means the following: (1) never being dishonest or lying, (2) never failing to make someone aware of the truth behind circumstances when you should, and (3) not cutting corners, and doing what you say you are going to do, and when you say you are going to do it.

You must never be dishonest or lie. If you lie then you are *toast*. This is the most direct cause of loss of credibility. Most liars are exposed, and people stop trusting them. People do not want to give liars work or do business with them.

Lying is all too common. When it occurs, careers quite often end. You simply cannot be good at any job and lie to others. It does not work.

Never fail to make someone aware of the truth. This area can be particularly problematic, because not disclosing the full truth is something many people do not consider as being dishonest. Why, I don't know.

A common example of this is the prosecutor who does not turn over exculpatory evidence, simply because he is not asked for it. These sorts of prosecutors can become pariahs in the legal community. More importantly, when you are an attorney working for someone else, you are expected to make your superiors aware of information they should be aware of. If you have failed to do something, or have done something, you need to make others aware of it.

Others will trust you if you make them aware of information they should know about. Keeping silent is often tantamount to lying. There are numerous examples I could get into here, but basically, if you do this you are hurting yourself and putting yourself in a situation wherein you might not be trusted in the future.

Do what you say you are going to do. This is probably the most common lapse of credibility out there. In fact, I would say this is the single largest credibility failure for an attorney.

First, if you say you are going to do something, then you should do it. No questions asked. If you cannot be trusted to get something done, then you are sending all sorts of negative messages to your employer. There are always excuses for not completing work or not doing this or that. However, there are always people who manage to get things done, and then there are people who always make excuses. You need to be trusted as someone who will get things done if you say you are going to do them.

Second, you should never cut corners when you work. This also is a credibility issue. If you are going to do something, you should do it in a professional and serious manner. This sort of performance will win you a great deal of credibility. In addition, people who carry out assignments this way are the ones who are most likely to get future work from clients and superiors. There are far too many people who do things half way, and do not complete work the way it should be done.

When I was about 20 years old, I met a man who ran a giant steel factory. He was an uneducated German immigrant who

was competing in my hometown of Detroit against some of the world's major steel factories. One day I met the president of a major automotive company, to which this man supplied a lot of steel. I told the president I could not understand how this man was so successful, because he appeared to lack business sense, and certainly could not hobnob with other important executives. The president told me one thing I will never forget: "*He does what he says he is going to do, and does it well. That's all he does. It's very rare.*"

Far too many people out there are out for a fast buck or a quick transaction. My career advice is to become someone of integrity, and you will be trusted and thrive.

It is important to be credible for a number of reasons: (1) it makes you human and therefore more likable and appreciated, (2) if you are not credible, people will fear that dealings with you will lead to negative repercussions for them, and (3) if you are dishonest you will constantly be reminded of your lack of credibility, no matter where you turn.

Everyone has probably seen a comedian perform at some point. Typically, the comedian will talk frankly about topics that most of us can relate to, but would never speak of publicly – sex, bathroom habits, or strange things they do. Most people laugh at comedians and enjoy them. I believe this is true is because comedians let us see who they are. We like people when we can really see who they are.

The work environment is extremely competitive. Many people spend a great deal of time trying to cover up their weaknesses. They do this by avoiding talking about what they cannot do. They don't tell clients they have never worked on a certain type of project; they do not speak about negative performance reviews to peers; they try not to let superiors know an assignment did not get done in a timely manner because they were out having fun over the weekend.

The most successful individuals I've known do not approach others with a tremendous degree of arrogance or confidence. Instead, they are always careful to point out what they know, what they can do, what their limitations are, and what they need in order to do whatever is being asked of them. This is an explicitly honest approach. It is also an approach that makes the person preferable to deal with.

If you think about it, the reasons you probably like people who act this way are not much different from the reasons you like comedians. When you like someone more, you are not only more forgiving, you trust they will ask the correct questions when carrying out assignments and doing work. You also identify with them because you know you too have limitations. When you identify with someone, it creates a bond of sorts, which makes your relationship stronger. In addition, when you let people know your limitations, they are more likely to award a "job well done".

I am not suggesting you should not be self-confident. You need to be. The issue is how you let people know your limitations and how honest you are with those around you. When you are honest with those around you, they will also be likely to open up to you more. You will learn more from the world around you and grow more.

If you are not credible, people will avoid dealing with you. Twice in the past two years I have come across attorneys who were terminated from their law firms for reasons related to a single credibility issue. What happened in each of these cases was so remarkable in its simplicity and stupidity it's hard to believe. The attorneys were asked by a partner if they had completed an assignment and although the attorneys said yes, they hadn't, and were fired as a result. In one case, the attorney was terminated only a couple of weeks before he was going to be formally installed as a partner in an AmLaw 100 law firm. In each case, I do not think the attorney found a [new job](#) for a long time, if at all. Certainly, no good recruiter would continue to represent someone who was dishonest like this.

The reason this simplistic bit of dishonesty, like most dishonesty, resulted in such a drastic outcome is because it has the capacity to hurt other people. If people tell their employer they did something when they did not, this will affect the employer's dealings with the client. The result is the employer could lose a client, which is bad for everyone involved.

Time after time, attorneys engage in one stupid episode of dishonesty after another. In the above example, the rationale may have been to appear competent for a moment or two in the partner's eyes. Who knows? Regardless, these sorts of lies ultimately harm people, and are seldom worth any perceived short term gain.

Everyone is certainly familiar with the trials of Martha Stewart, Dennis Kowalski and others regarding various sorts of fraud and insider trading charges. Each of these episodes looks harmless enough on the surface. Nevertheless, these people ultimately hurt investors and others who relied upon the dishonest representations of the individuals in question.

When you are dishonest with others, you put them in the position of not knowing if up is up or down is down when they are dealing with you. People will actually fear doing business with you.

This is something I have noticed over and over again in the attorney placement business. When a [recruiting firm](#) decides to cut corners and be dishonest in one respect or another, law firms and others in the legal community quickly learn of the dishonesty. As a consequence, they do not know if what the recruiter is saying is right or wrong. They do not trust the recruiter and opt to cease doing business with them completely. Because it is a small industry, other law firms and employers quickly learn about the recruiter's dishonest ways. Very shortly, the recruiter may be out of business.

A lot of times people who do something dishonest are under the impression they can do one dishonest thing, get away with it, and then come out ahead. This is rarely the case. When you lack credibility, you will be constantly reminded of it. This is the case whether you do one, or many things wrong.

One of the most common forms of dishonesty is the lie. There are different categories of lies. It can be something as benign as calling in sick when one is not really sick. On another level, there are things like lying about whether an assignment was completed, or lying about what a law means, so that you can do something you want to do. The issue with these sorts of lies is that you may often have to tell many additional lies to cover up for your original one. The more lies you tell, the more you have to keep telling. Pretty soon, lying becomes a near full-time occupation, and the lies just continue to build upon themselves. This is almost always disastrous.

In addition, a lot of people think if they are dishonest with someone, they can confine their dishonesty to that one person and be okay. This, too, is rarely true. If you upset one person through your dishonesty, chances are you will see them again and again and again. How you deal with the guilt of upsetting them is up to you. You need to understand, however, you will likely carry that guilt for a long time.

Your credibility is one of the most important aspects of your career. For many, credibility comes naturally. Others are always looking for a way to cut corners, or are simply dishonest. Those who cut corners and lack credibility never come out on top. In fact, their failure and mediocrity are all but assured.

Job seekers often don't understand their reputations are fragile. The most important thing you can do for your reputation is to approach your work with credibility in mind. Always err on the side of credibility.

Read More About Lying or Exaggerating:

- [Never Ever Fib or Push the Truth on Your Resume or Interviews](#)
- [Tell the Truth](#)

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