

## Lying in the Big Leagues

At the risk of turning this column into a police blotter, here are some headlines from the ethics front:

- New York Yankees superstar Alex Rodriguez has finally detailed his use of illegal steroids as a young player. After a succession of earlier denials, he admitted that he bought the drugs in the Dominican Republic and had his cousin deliver the injections.
- Texas billionaire R. Allen Stanford has been charged by the U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission with fraudulently selling \$8 billion in certificates of deposit. His banks and companies in the Caribbean island nation of Antigua and Barbuda have been seized by regulators.
- Toronto fund manager Weizhen Tang, the self-styled “Chinese Warren Buffett,” is being investigated by the Ontario Securities Commission for allegedly perpetrating a Ponzi scheme that defrauded investors in Canada, the U.S., and China of some \$60 million.

I could go on, but you get the point. What’s common to these examples is deception. From Stanford’s gargantuan frauds to the half-truths swirling around Rodriguez and Tang, they all come down to a single word: lying.

We may never know why people lie. But a sobering survey of U.S. 12-to-17-year-olds published earlier this year reminds us that we’re not educating the next generation about the value of truth-telling. Many of today’s teens are as thoroughly confused about lying as are these three headliners. The survey

found that 80 percent believe they are prepared to make ethical decisions when they join the workforce. Yet of that group, nearly half (49 percent) say that lying to parents or guardians is okay – and 61 percent have done so in the last year.

The data also shows that, among the whole sample:

- More than a quarter (27 percent) think that “behaving violently is sometimes, often, or always acceptable.”
- More than a third (38 percent) think that “you have to break the rules at school to succeed.”
- Only about half (54 percent) see their parents as role models, and many have no role models at all.
- Perhaps as a result, teens feel “more accountable to themselves (86 percent) than they do to their parents or guardians (52 percent), their friends (41 percent), or society (33 percent).”

The survey was conducted telephonically by Opinion Research Corporation for Junior Achievement and Deloitte in October 2008. (Deloitte is a corporate sponsor of The Institute for Global Ethics.)

Reflect on what this data tells us. Not only are many teens using lies to negotiate their way through the world. Not only are large numbers persuaded that violence and rule-breaking are appropriate tools for getting ahead. Not only are they wandering leaderless in a moral wilderness, looking only to themselves as guides. They also feel they’re perfectly ready to make ethical decisions in the business world.

What are the lessons here? First, don’t blame the teens. They’re only doing what they’ve been taught. If our middle- and high-school cultures telegraph to kids an ethical relativism that assumes all values are situational and negotiable, kids will naturally reflect that culture. Nor will they outgrow it at university. “During the college years,” writes former Harvard University President Derek Bok in *Our Underachieving Colleges*, “large majorities remain in a naïve relativist state, persuaded

that many problems have no single correct answer and that none of the possible answers is necessarily better than the others.” Unless we bring moral clarity to their confusion – by showing them, for instance, the incongruity of saying, “Yes, I’m an ethical leader,” and in the next breath saying, “Yes, I break rules” – who will?

Second, this survey helps explain why the global economy is in such trouble. The character education movement, while spreading, is not far ahead of where it was 35 years ago. If kids then got as little instruction in integrity as they typically get today, should we be surprised that some of them, as they grow up to be the star players managing our investments or setting our athletic standards, take their ethical relativism with them? Isn’t it clear that some of today’s stars, if handed the Junior Achievement/Deloitte poll, would say both, “Yes, I make ethical decisions,” and, “Yes, I lie, cheat, and defraud” – and yet see nothing odd about their answers?

But it is odd. It’s bizarre that we should be mired in a recession increasingly understood to be driven by moral collapses. It’s strange that we think the moral fecklessness underlying those collapses, so easy to spot, is so hard to correct. That correction must involve deliberate, purpose-driven efforts to educate about character and ethics. Anything less simply enables a new generation to slip easily into apprenticeships at Stanford, Tang, Rodriguez, & Sons, where they’ll finally learn how to lie in the big leagues. |

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