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Is the decline in truth, accountability in Washington lowering standards for ethics in middle-market businesses?

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As the definition of truthfulness and the standards for personal accountability continue to decline in our nation's capital, and many do not seem to care, are

similar patterns trickling into middle-market businesses? Is it becoming more acceptable to have 50 shades of truth in business dealings?

Recent news reports of comments by 60 Minutes correspondent Lesley Stahl that President Donald Trump admitted to attacking the media to "discredit" journalists and minimize negative stories about himself are making these questions more pressing today. With our President publicly calling one of the leaders of our closest allies "dishonest," who would have thought? Further intensifying matters, others around the President are reportedly following suit. Sometimes, after they learn what they said is not true, they seemingly fail to acknowledge or rectify their mistakes. They even double down! One wonders how anyone doing this could sleep at night. What lessons are our children learning?

It seems that years back the traditional values of integrity and honesty were more important than today, which is quite sad. Where is Honest Abe when we need him?

So, what should we do if we catch employees telling half-truths, some of which we know are deliberately fudged or outright lies? I never would have imagined myself having to dedicate a column to a topic that should be common sense, but unfortunately our nation's current state of affairs leaves me no choice.

First, let us be clear: Our word should be paramount. It is not OK to be dishonest, lie or misrepresent the truth in any way. Honesty in business dealings starts at the top of a company and is set by example.

If one of our employees did to us what some members of our current administration are doing, would we give a warning or fire him or her outright? Of course, before doing anything, we should check with our human resources departments and legal counsel to help ensure we take the appropriate corrective measures to not create exposure or liability.

As it pertains to our clients: Is it OK for employees to make promises they know they cannot deliver? Is there a distinction between when they are lying

to themselves versus lying to us or our clients? Simply put, any form of misrepresentation or alteration of the truth to clients is never acceptable. No matter how difficult, it is always best to deal with others with honesty, transparency and authenticity. In addition to it being the ethical and moral thing to do, it is also good for business — because ultimately, people find out and their trust in us deteriorates or is irreparably lost, which will hurt our business.

There is a big difference between a mistake and a lie. How should mistakes be handled? Again, it goes back to traditional values: Take ownership, apologize and do whatever is necessary to fix the problem and prevent it from happening again. Taking ownership and apologizing defuses the situation and helps us retain something priceless: our reputation and credibility.

Additionally, in the event of a serious misrepresentation, including one that might involve criminal offenses, proactively taking the right steps such as immediately seeking legal counsel and notifying the authorities can reduce the penalties and/or jail time. The news is riddled with examples of high-profile business leaders brought down by wrongful acts that were further intensified by attempted cover-ups.

Without a doubt, as social media and sites like Glassdoor continue to put businesses in a glass house, it is critical to dress the part and follow the right protocols.

Regardless of what may be happening in our government, business owners should always do the right thing and heed the wise words of our mothers who told us that “honesty is the best policy.”

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