

# The Dog Ate My Laptop

When Your Ethics Clash With Your Boss's

by Nan DeMars CPS

**Q:** Dear Nan: I love my job and enjoy working for my boss, a production manager for a huge printing company. Clients want their printing jobs “yesterday” and we are always facing deadlines which are not always realistic. To keep the customer happy, my boss is telling clients their orders have been shipped (when they are not even completed), and he insists I give the same answer when they call. This is driving me crazy because I know my boss is lying to the customer and I’m expected to do the same. And, at the end of the day, when the order is finally shipped, I also know my boss will blame the shipping delay on the shipper. No matter how you cut it, we are both just plain lying. This bothers me ethically and yet I don’t know how to keep both my ethics and my job intact.

*-Susan in Production*

**A:** I asked IAAP members for their responses to this question and the members came through. Thanks for the many responses to this dilemma. Almost 100 percent of you firmly responded you would never lie for your boss and reiterated your belief that honesty is always the best policy. It’s gratifying to know you have not had to compromise your ethics to keep your jobs during this economic downturn.

### Let’s Face It— Lying Is Lying

I have yet to hear a defensible reason to ask an employee to lie for the boss. Likewise, I have yet to hear an employee satisfactorily explain why he or she absolutely had to do so. Even the “telephone white lie” can be circumvented by the clever word, “unavailable,” followed by an offer to pass on the message.

With mounting fears over job security, however, there may be more pressure on employees to ignore their moral compass and cover for the boss. Their logic?





Protecting their boss' job may safeguard theirs.

A lie is only a short-term fix. Randy Cohen, who writes "The Ethicist" column in the *New York Times Magazine*, states that even small lies can snowball and damage your reputation. "It's seldom you get an explicit deal from the devil—these things creep up. I'm sure, for the most part, these lies are extremely minor and easy to justify but once you kill the first guy, it's not so hard to kill the second."

All lies are intentionally deceptive messages. They are explicitly intended to mislead. There are two primary ways to lie: to conceal and to falsify. By concealing, the liar withholds information without actually saying anything untrue. When falsifying, the liar goes one step further and not only withholds information, but also presents false information as if it were true. Susan's boss is doing both.

### Should You Speak Up Or Comply?

Your answer directly impacts your company's reputation, so you are compelled to try to stop the lying. When you are complicit in a lie, you signal your professionalism can be compromised and your ethics are negotiable. Carolyn Walker CPS/CAP, assistant professor, administrative office technology, Greenville Technical College, Greenville, S.C. writes: "Your boss may feel you are okay with lying if you do not speak up." To remain passive and silent without protest while your client is being deceived is to commit a lie of omission. If your boss is quick to tell lies to or about someone else, you may be next. No matter how you approach this dilemma, you are obligated to speak up. Remember Oprah Winfrey's mantra: Silence means consent!

### What To Say When You Speak Up

When your ethics clash with your boss' ethics and you want to clear the air, you will have to initiate the discussion. This is the time for truth-telling without any sugar-coating. Stay focused on observable actions—getting righteous now will aggravate an already stressful situation. Christine Russell, administrative assistant, Littleton Regional Hospital, Littleton, N.H. cautions against "coming at your boss with ethical guns blazing." Instead, she suggests seeking an alternative to lying, thereby removing the ethical dilemma while making your boss look good and creating happier customers.

### When You Meet

1. Tell your boss you enjoy working with him and want to continue your professional relationship.
2. State you are concerned with his pattern of lying and "uncomfortable" with being asked to be a partner in these lies. Simply explaining how you "feel" (e.g. compromised) when caught in this unethical squeeze may be enough to cause him to rethink his own behavior. Be specific about the irate phone calls you receive. It is possible, due to focusing on his own problems, he is not aware of the stress all this juggling is having on you, his assistant. Explain that you want people to trust you and him and, if they perceive your truthfulness as questionable, the professional respect you both deserve is corroded.
3. Initiate alternatives. Offer to help investigate where the logjams are in the production and shipping process.
4. Finally, anticipate problems and compose truthful responses in advance. Dee Drummer CPS, IAAP Ames Chapter, Ames, Iowa writes, "Develop appropriate responses you are both comfortable with, such as: 'We

are doing the best we can to meet the short turnaround time,' or, 'Your product is finishing production and scheduled to ship within the next two hours.'" Your point is you will not lie.

5. Follow up by documenting the conversation (date/discussion notes) for your personal files.

There is always the possibility you have an ethically-impaired boss who will continue to lie to customers and insist that you do the same. Then, you have two recourses: 1) Report your conversation to the HR director, compliance director or whomever you deem appropriate in your company and/or 2) Begin a new job search. No job is worth compromising your personal integrity. Kellie Bateman, admin assistant, Woodlands Development Company, The Woodlands, Texas adds: "In the end, people will appreciate your honesty. If this person's boss isn't one of those people, then she should bide her time until she can find a job where honesty is appreciated. Maybe even with one of the clients she has been truthful with."

### The Fall-Out Of Lying

Clients are not fooled anyway. Brenda G. Hogarth CPS, administrative assistant, Nevada Department of Transportation, Elko, Nev. writes: "Customers always know when they've been lied to and will take their business elsewhere." Blaming the late arrival on the shipper is a doomed strategy at best, as shipping receipts are date stamped and easily tracked

Lying undermines relationships by undermining trust and trust is what forms the basis of our professional relationships. When trust takes a hit, so does constructive communication. Erna S. Ray CPS/CAP, President IAAP Black-Eyed Susan Chapter, Arnold, Md. reminds us that:

"Customers are what keeps an organization in business. And, the integrity of its owners and employees is one of the most important values that are reflected in business transactions."

### Establish Your Ethical Standards Upfront

The best way to keep your ethics and your job is to establish your ethical boundaries at the beginning of your professional relationship, stick to them and continue to draw the line in the sand whenever your ethics are being challenged. One CEO said he was interviewing a candidate for his new assistant position and she suddenly said: "I will never lie for you but, you also should know I will never lie to you." He found her candor refreshing and he hired her on the spot."

Tami Dickinson CPS/CAP, coordinator, Sodexo Corporate Service Solutions, Marietta, Ga. had a similar experience in a job interview. Her boss asked her to rate several different values in order of importance as she saw them. "I rated 'honesty' number one, and made it very clear that I would not be dishonest nor lie for any person in the workplace. He agreed with this assessment and I was hired. In the seven years I worked with him, whenever he'd see the reaction on my face as he was beginning to suggest a 'fib,' he was quick to clarify the situation so I'd be able to best prepare how to deal with it. I didn't back off and he never fought me on it."

### Don't Become A Cooked Frog

An ethical "fudging" dilemma can be a dangerously slippery slope. Without even realizing it, succumbing to a few "not to worry" unethical lying requests can morph into a situation you cannot recover from.

Remember the little frog that accidentally fell backwards into a pail of hot, scalding water jumped out and saved his life? His sister, however, wasn't so fortunate. She was placed in a pail of lukewarm water and each day the heat was increased just a little bit more until she was cooked.

You do not deserve to be cooked!

Past International President of IAAP, Nan DeMars CPS is an internationally-recognized authority and seminar leader on office ethics. She is president of Executary Services in Minneapolis and author of *You Want Me To Do What? When, Where and How to Draw the Line at Work* (Simon & Schuster). Nan's website is: [www.office-ethics.com](http://www.office-ethics.com).