



4 Things Master Liars Do (and How to Spot Them)

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As a leader at any level across a wide variety of organizations, you likely will run into a direct report, peer, customer, or other who appears to be stretching the truth, or outright lying. If you are like me, you struggle at times to discern what is truth and what is fiction in their story.

Recently, I had the experience of meeting and trying to help someone on the streets of Minneapolis; that interaction helped shed light on this question. I will call him Big Roy. He was a drug dealer and user, and my wife, a couple of friends, and I befriended him as part of an outreach in the inner city. Warm, personable, and friendly, Big Roy was quite the opposite of the kind of person I thought I would encounter hanging out at 10 p.m. on the street. After our first meeting, in which we talked with him for about an hour, we met him on several more occasions where we talked, laughed, cried, prayed, and shared food with him.

Toward the end of the first week of our interaction with Big Roy, we began to be a bit suspicious about whether the stories he told us were true. We wanted to be trusting and loving with this guy, and he convinced us that he earnestly desired to turn his life around and work a legitimate job—maybe as an addiction counselor, or even a pastor.

Finally, after more than a week, we began to talk with others we had begun to identify—family members, case workers, staff—who had known Big Roy for many years. Their stories came into stark contrast with his stories. When I gently but directly confronted Big Roy about the inconsistencies in his stories, he became angry and belligerent, demanding to know who I had talked with and who had authorized me to call his sister. That’s when I simply shook his hand, wished him good luck, and parted company with Big Roy. It was clear that he had been masterfully lying the whole time.

Street smarts education. It was quite an eye-opening experience for me that provided a valuable education. In my four decades of coaching and counseling experience, I had never met someone who could lie with such a straight face, cry with real tears in a way that feigned brokenness, and manipulate people so smoothly to get what he wanted from them. I decided to share what I learned from my brief but intense relationship with Big Roy by focusing on what I discovered about people who lie. My hope is that this perspective from someone who is a Master Liar will help you spot less adept liars you run into as a part of your work and personal lives.

What really adept liars do to get their needs met. Here are four things Master Liars do:

- **Obfuscate the lies with truth.** Instead of spinning a yarn that is totally false, they interweave components of truth with lies. This way, they keep you guessing which pieces are true and which are false. They make vague statements that can be easily misunderstood and easily denied later when you question them. “Oh, I didn’t say that, I said this...,” or, picking out a piece that actually was true, “This IS true, it’s exactly what I said.” Sometimes, they will bring in other

people to corroborate their stories, but these people will only know about PART of the story, and the liar then uses this true piece to validate the whole story.

- **Foster gratitude.** To soften your heart, they will do something or take some action that is, or appear to be, genuinely altruistic and aimed at helping those they are manipulating. It might be a small gesture, something that shows they care about you or are looking out for your best interests, with no thought to their own safety or benefit. In Big Roy's case, he very assertively escorted us off the street that first night and into our car, explaining later that some gang members had arrived and we were no longer safe.
- **Win you over with their charm.** You are more likely to believe a liar if they stay friendly and upbeat, even when you begin to question their veracity. If liars engage you in such a way that you develop a genuine liking and compassion for them, then it becomes more difficult for you to ask the tough questions and become skeptical of the liar's words and actions. Big Roy shared stories about his kids, showed genuine interest in our families, joked with waitresses when we took him out to eat, and expressed gratitude for all we were doing for him.
- **Feign a genuine heart change.** The crowning achievement for a liar is to get you to believe that they are genuinely sorry for their past actions and words, that they are truly repentant and broken about what they have done in the past, and that they have done a complete turnaround because of your interest in them. This takes an actor or actress of sociopathic proportions, one who can cry real tears of remorse, sadness, pain, or happiness when telling whopping lies. In the end, my wife and friends agreed with me that his real calling was not drug dealer, addiction counselor, or pastor, but actor.

How you can protect yourself from liars. In the first year or so of my career, I made the conscious decision to trust people until I discovered they were being deceitful, rather than distrusting them and discovering later that they were being truthful. You might take the opposite stance, but, either way, you can use this brief guide to help you respond appropriately and protect yourself to a degree:

- **Trust, but verify:** be warm and friendly when others give you their version of what happened in a particular situation; ask questions to get their whole story. When details seem vague, ask more questions, or find out who else can verify the facts. With these additional people, make sure you ask enough questions to determine the truth of what they are telling you.
- **Listen to your gut:** when people seem 'too good to be true' in their actions and words, too friendly too soon for the circumstances, too charming, or too quick to shed tears and self-disclose, begin to put up a protective barrier. If a little voice in your head or a feeling in your heart begins to question the veracity of a story or explanation, don't ignore it. Ask follow on questions. If they become belligerent or defensive, begin to question your trust in the situation.
- **Insert accountability:** continue to be helpful, but make sure you insert some parameters that require them to take steps on their own, to take responsibility to help themselves. See if they become resistant or defensive when this shift occurs.

Bottom line, there are people like Big Roy working in organizations like yours who have become very proficient at lying to protect themselves and get their way. Hopefully, the insights from my recent 'street education' can be applied in your work.