

Technical Affairs

By Mike Aamodt, Associate Editor

Detecting Deception: Art, Science, or Neither?

There are many human resource contexts in which detecting deception is important. For example, deception might occur when interviewing applicants, evaluating statements in a sexual harassment investigation, listening to absenteeism excuses, and checking references. Though research from forensic psychology indicates that such electronic methods as the polygraph, voice stress analyzer, brain fingerprinting, and brain mapping can detect deception at well above chance levels, very few judgments by HR professionals about the truthfulness of statements are made using these methods. Instead, almost all judgments about the veracity of a verbal statement are made by subjectively analyzing the content of the message and the paralanguage and body language of the person communicating the message.

Are people good at detecting deception?

Unfortunately, the research literature suggests that, in general, people are not highly skilled at using communication cues to detect deception and only slightly exceed chance levels in detecting deception (Vrij, 2000). A recent meta-analysis of deception studies indicated that the average accuracy in identifying a statement as being truthful or deceptive is only 54% when chance is 50% (Aamodt & Mitchell, 2004). Thus, the typical person is not an effective lie detector. These results are important given that most of us make judgments about the truthfulness of statements and then take actions based on those judgments—many of which turn out to be inaccurate.

Are certain types of people better than others at detecting deception?

According to the Aamodt and Mitchell (2004) meta-analysis, the answer is probably not. On the basis of 83 studies covering 11,828 subjects, the results indicated that confidence ($r = .06$, $k = 33$, $N = 3,201$), age ($r = -.02$, $k = 10$, $N = 967$), experience ($r = -.07$, $k = 8$, $N = 696$), and education ($r = .04$, $k = 3$, $N = 442$) were not significantly related to accuracy in detecting deception (in meta-analysis, r = mean correlation, k = the number of studies in the meta-analysis, and N = the number of subjects across the studies). Furthermore, “professional lie catchers” such as police officers, detectives, judges and psychologists ($M = 54.54\%$, $N = 2,315$) were no more accurate at detecting deception than were students and other citizens ($M = 54.08\%$, $N = 9,471$). Interestingly, women were no more accurate than men at detecting deception ($d = -.01$, $k = 26$, $N = 2,626$).

There are two interpretations of these findings. It could be that, in general, people are not good detectors of deception regardless of their age, sex, confidence, and experience. Or, it could be that the artificial situations and tasks

used in most studies do not allow for proper detection of deception. In “real world” situations, judgments about deception are often made on such factors as the story not making logical sense, a person not directly answering the question being asked, and inconsistencies with previous statements or the statements of others. With the tasks used in most studies, such factors could not be used by the subjects attempting to detect deception. Furthermore, deception is best detected when there is a baseline of behavior, responses are spontaneous, and there is a consequence for getting caught (e.g., going to prison, not getting a job). In most, if not all, of the studies in this meta-analysis, such conditions were not met.

Can we be trained to be better lie catchers?

The answer to this question is a qualified, “yes.” A summary of the research indicates that, in general, training can increase accuracy (Vrij, 2000). The qualification to this answer is that it depends on the type of training. Much of the training received by law enforcement personnel and human resource professionals is based on “pop science” which advocates looking at cues such as gaze aversion and fidgeting—cues that research shows are not indicative of deception. In such cases, training can actually decrease accuracy in detecting deception. If the training, however, is based on research, accuracy is increased.

Which cues do science support as being indicators of deception?

It is important to understand that no single cue is an indicator of truth or deception. Though some training workshops and self-help books teach that a person may be lying if the person does not make eye contact or if the person fidgets while talking, research does not support such ideas. Body language and paralanguage are only important when

(continued on next page)

they are different from the way a person normally communicates. That is, we all know people who always make eye contact when talking, and we all know others who seldom make eye contact when talking. The way in which a person typically communicates provides information about his or her personality, culture, background, or temperament, whereas a change from normal provides potential information about his or her current state of mind. Thus, it is important to have a baseline to which we can compare a person's current behavior.

For example, a person who normally talks fast might be perceived as having an energetic or creative personality (or being a New Yorker). If one day that same person speaks more slowly than usual, we would probably notice that difference and might infer that he is depressed, not feeling well, or worried. So, any change from a person's normal communication style might be an indication that something is going on. Whether that emotion is deception, fear, shame, embarrassment, or some other emotion is difficult to say. The change merely tells us that something might be going on, and that we should probe more deeply.

With that in mind, are some cues more important than others in detecting deception? The best source to answer this question is an impressive meta-analysis of 120 studies by Bella DePaulo and her colleagues (DePaulo et al., 2003). The meta-analysis found that compared to people telling the truth, liars:

- Provided fewer details in their statements ($d = -.30$, $k = 24$, $N = 883$)
- Were more nervous ($d = .27$, $k = 12$, $N = 571$)
- Made fewer spontaneous corrections ($d = -.29$, $k = 5$, $N = 183$)
- Were less likely to admit a lack of memory ($d = -.42$, $k = 5$, $N = 183$)
- Made statements that were not as plausible ($d = -.23$, $k = 9$, $N = 395$), logical ($d = -.25$, $k = 6$, $N = 223$), or consistent with other statements ($d = -.34$, $k = 7$, $N = 243$)

As noted by DePaulo et al. (2003) and others, combinations of cues are more meaningful than single cues. For example, if a person is nervous but does not exhibit any other "common cues to deception" or any other changes from normal, it would not be prudent to infer that the person is lying. Accuracy can also be increased by objectively observing two people interact rather than by personally interviewing the person.

Final Thoughts

Evaluating statements for potential deception is an important task for human resource professionals. It is important for us to realize that, in general, we are not good at detecting truth from deception and thus, when possible, we should avoid making judgments based solely on body language and paralanguage. However, we can be trained to increase accuracy, and if we stick to systematically using patterns of cues supported by research, and comparing these cues to a baseline of behavior, our judgments will be more accurate.

References

- Aamodt, M. G., & Mitchell, H. (2004, October). Who can best catch a liar? A meta-analysis of individual differences in detecting deception. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the Society for Police and Criminal Psychology, Rome, Italy.
- DePaulo, B. M., Lindsay, J. J., Malone, B. E., Muhlenbruck, L., Charlton, K., & Cooper, H. (2003). *Cues to deception*. *Psychological Bulletin*, 129(1), 74-118.
- Vrij, A. (2000). *Detecting lies and deceit: The psychology of lying and the implications for professional practice*. Chichester, England: John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.

HR HUMOR

The following were actual excuses employees reported for missing work in a recent survey by career-builder.com

- I was sprayed by a skunk.
- I tripped over my dog and was knocked unconscious.
- My bus broke down and was held up by robbers.
- I was arrested as a result of mistaken identity.
- I forgot to come back to work after lunch.
- I couldn't find my shoes.
- I hurt myself bowling.
- I was spit on by a venomous snake.
- I totaled my wife's jeep in a collision with a cow.
- A hitman was looking for me.
- My curlers burned my hair and I had to go to the hairdresser.
- I eloped.
- My cat unplugged my alarm clock.
- I had to be there for my husband's grand jury trial.
- I had to ship my grandmother's bones to India. (note: she had passed away 20 years ago) —ACN