

# HAVEN TO HELL



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Fortinberry Murray Principal  
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# IS DISHONESTY IN OUR GENES? OR IS IT STRESS?

By Dr Bob Murray

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ONE OF THE THINGS I AM OFTEN ASKED to talk about at conferences around the world is the science behind dishonesty and bad or unethical corporate behaviour generally.

I’m more than happy to do so—it’s one of my favorite topics. But there’s not much point in knowing the scientific “why” of these behaviours unless you are also aware of what science says can be done about it. Let’s have a look at both.

The most usual question I get asked is: Is dishonesty genetic?

Well the answer is yes and no. Yes some people are genetically predisposed for dishonesty, and no, others aren’t. Can you tell which is which? To some extent you can. But it’s easier with men than it is with women. This doesn’t mean that men are more dishonest generally, just more likely to be so under certain conditions.

A lot of studies on the science of dishonesty have been carried out since about 2010. The headline findings are:

Dishonesty is highly inheritable. Perhaps 40 percent of all dishonesty is genetic. Men are more likely to initiate dishonest acts but women

are more likely to be persuaded to commit dishonest acts by others

- Machiavellianism, which is closely tied to dishonesty, exhibits a different brain structure to normal
- Men under 45 are more likely to be dishonest than those over that age
- Dishonesty is closely linked to risk-taking, which itself is very largely genetic
- Both men and women with elevated testosterone levels are more likely to be dishonest
- Men and women are equally likely to commit immoral or dishonest acts at work when they are under stress—especially if they fear job-loss
- Both sexes are liable to bully their co-workers if they feel that they have been working hard for the benefit of their firm or company or if they feel that they have had to be overly ethical in their work
- Most spontaneous dishonest or unethical acts happen sometime after or just before meals





- You can tell whether men are liable to carry out dishonest, unethical or bullying acts (especially towards women) if their index fingers and their ring fingers are about the same length
- Dishonesty increases as people climb the ranks in an organisation. However the higher you go the less likely you are to recognise your own dishonesty. It's called the executive bubble
- Bad and unethical behaviour is highly contagious. If people see either co-workers or supervisors behaving badly they are more likely to do so. It's the action of the mirror cell system in the brain
- Dishonesty reduces longevity.

For a GRC professional this makes work rather complicated. Science cannot offer a quick and easy way to tell who is going to be the one who is going to be honest, non-compliant, be a bully or adopt an unsatisfactory risk profile.

It would be good if you could just do a swab test and make a call as to those people who had unethical behaviour in their DNA. The problem there is that we are not at all sure which genes promote bad behaviour. And even if we did the complicated dance between genetics, context and experience would make that knowledge less than highly valuable.

What we do know is that excessive stress leads to activating those genes, those brain areas and those neurochemicals that are thought to lie behind the problems that GRC professionals face in terms of poor or unethical governance, risk and compliance.

As stress in all industries grows, the danger of fraud, dishonesty and bad behaviour at work generally will increase.

So what does science say an organisation can do to reduce the possibility of bad or unethical behaviour? There are a number of actions which management can take to reduce the problem:

- Adopt an attitude of zero tolerance to bad behaviour of all kinds. This will reduce the contagion effect. Take whatever steps possible to reduce the stress level at work. Some obvious steps



**“In human terms, culture is about mutual support, bonding, and the mutually-accepted behaviors that build and signify those.”**

are simple (though some may be resisted by excessive bean-counters):

- Allow pets at work—many studies have shown that pets, even other people's, are great stress reducers
- Increase the number of potted plants (not cut plants)
- Replace pictures of abstract “art” with scenes of nature. Jangling art increases stress, pictures of natural surroundings or animals reduce stress
- Allow increased opportunity for people to socialise and to get to know each other
- Avoid any loud music—this includes the music you play while people are waiting on hold
- Allow plenty of time for exercise
- Disallow the practice of people having meals at their desk. Working while eating counteracts the beneficial effects of glutamate on the nervous system

Other somewhat more complex, but powerful, stress-reduction steps are:

- Adopt a more transformational and inclusive style of leadership at all levels
- Do not get suckered into open plan or activity-based work spaces (they only really work for extroverts)
- Make sure there is ample natural light and a relaxing view
- Take all your people into the decision-making process of each major decision
- Avoid hiring anyone who has had an ethical problem in the past or has been a bully. The very fact of your hiring such a person—no matter how seemingly reformed they are—will signal that such actions are okay

All these steps will greatly increase productivity and engagement as well as reducing undesirable behaviour. •••