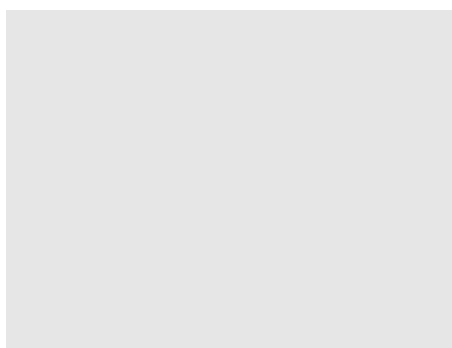


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Roger Hockett: For some of us, honesty still matters

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Jan 3, 2024



Hockett

Contributed Photo

What is one's personal word worth? Presently, not much for a lot of folks. We are in the midst of an epidemic of public lying and cheating behavior. The belief in personal honor seems to be out of fashion. Present public behavior seems to value lying, which eventually will get you what you want. Average people do it, giant corporations do it, institutions do it, and politicians do it.

Some of us still believe in keeping your word.

When I was running my commercial furniture business, Workspaces Inc., in the 2000s, I shipped a large order to Austin, Texas, to outfit a new office building for a client. My custom cabinet vendor made an order entry error and instead of making the cabinets in white, they made all of them in black. When the shipment arrived and my installer began unpacking it, the client was aghast: Wrong color!

The owner immediately called me and with great anxiety told me of the error (we are talking many thousands of dollars). I listened to him and felt this adrenaline gut punch you

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get with bad news. I could also sense his fear. I told him not to worry, we would make it right.

The cabinet factory owner, Lyle, was an honest man and we agreed to share the cost to replace all the cabinets at no charge to the client. So we remade two dozen cabinets; I paid for the reshipping costs and the installer to switch out the cabinets. The client thanked me profusely. Not one written complaint was required to make it right. It was all based on keeping one's word.

Another incident occurred in an earlier company called Elements Inc. in the early 90s. In order to raise the money to build a state-of-the-art furniture factory I sold the controlling 1% of stock to several ex-managers from AT&T. I served as the design engineer and supervised the manufacturing process. We built a modern factory and were doing very well in developing our market.

However, the absentee investors were used to high spending and our little company was being charged for their expensive habits. I had a meeting with them and they agreed to cut back on spending and I agreed to provide more funds to the company, in return getting liens against the new equipment to secure the loans.

A year later while reviewing the books I discovered that they were siphoning off the employees' Social Security withholding deposits and using them on their expenses. This was alarming.

I sought the advice of an excellent young lawyer and told him what had happened. His response: "You are resigning today! The IRS will follow you to your grave."

I submitted my resignation the next day and eventually forced them into federal Bankruptcy Court and got most of my money back at the factory auction mandated by the court.

These were dishonest people who could lie with a big smile.

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My rural parents felt that lying reflected bad character. And I cannot remember them not keeping their word. They were not perfect but keeping your word was part of being respected in Wallowa County. My father loaned out farm equipment to neighbors when they needed it and the unstated agreement was to take care of it and return it in good condition. We did not go to the lawyer to get something on paper with a signature. Wikipedia has a list of federal officials who have been convicted in court. The list runs 12 pages of single-spaced text. The list of state and local convictions is even longer.

Currently many Americans seem to believe it is OK for politicians they like to lie because the lies will get the results they agree with, but that it is terrible if people they don't like lie.

Today in this nation we have a politician who used to be a businessman who developed hotels and resorts. His businesses declared bankruptcy six times. Those bankruptcies involved dismissing all the small business vendor claims (businessmen like myself), laying off thousands of employees, and then restructuring the company that allowed him to retain significant ownership of the assets.

I sometimes reflect on all those small business people who were cheated. There was Larry Walters, who made draperies for the hotels and lost \$380,000. There was Forest Jenkins, who installed toilet partitions and lost \$140,000. There was Edward Friel, who supplied cabinets and who was forced into his own bankruptcy.

In my own company I never bought anything from a supplier that I did not pay for in full. No one ever got stiffed and I slept well at night. We met our payroll every two weeks and employee withholding went to the IRS. We shipped over 5,000 furniture projects on the internet from 1995 until 2016 and we never had a single complaint posted on the web.

This essay is about the fact there is an important election coming next year and it looks like the guy whose businesses declared bankruptcy six times and encouraged his supporters to trash the nation's Capitol will be a candidate. It would be a good time for this nation to reflect on what values they want their leader to possess.

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Roger Hockett grew up in Wallowa County and is retired in Newcastle, Washington. He is a veteran and spent a life designing, crafting, and manufacturing furniture.

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