

# When Brutal Honesty is a Brutal Mistake

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Some people wear it like a badge of honor, something that's part of their identity.

"I'm brutally honest."

"I say it like it is."

I get the appeal. We generally appreciate honesty and candid communication. We sometimes equate "brutal honesty" with strength of character or integrity.

### **But the truth is much more complicated.**

Sometimes—many times, I'd argue—brutal honesty is a brutal mistake.

Let's be clear: I'm not advocating dishonesty at all. Don't lie.

But for those people who think having the words "He was brutally honest" chiseled into your gravestone would be an accomplishment, I have one question: **How's that working for you?**

And related to that, what's the quality of your relationships with people around you? If I asked your coworkers or other people who know you, would they say you're approachable? Kind? Easy to be around?

I think there's an important distinction to be made regarding the ways in which "brutal honesty" is good and the ways in which it's bad.

### **Good Brutal Honesty**

Sometimes there are things that people need to hear but may not want to hear. In those situations, brutal honesty can be appropriate when:

- It's really necessary for the good of the other person (it's not about you).
- You're sharing verifiable facts or data.
- You're balancing your statements with compassion and empathy.

### **Bad Brutal Honesty**

The "good" type of brutal honesty requires a great deal of skill. And in my experience, it's rare. More often, brutal honesty can backfire on the deliverer of such "honesty." In these situations, it's usually the case that:

- You're saying something to make yourself feel better—more righteous, more "correct," smarter—not to help the other person.
- You're stating an opinion or venting about how you feel—not discussing verifiable observations or data.
- You're not considering how what you say will affect how the other person sees you and your relationship with him or her—it's more brutal than it is honest.

Every time we communicate, we're not just sharing whatever information we intend. We're also making an implied statement about how we view the relationship with the other party. That's why "brutal

honesty” can be so tricky. And oftentimes, “saying it like it is” can result in damaged relationships, broken trust, and ultimately end up with the brutally honest communicator becoming isolated because no one wants to interact with him or her.

Again, honesty is good. But I always try to remind myself that how I say something is just as important as what I say.

I also try to remember that just because I think something does not mean I have to say it.

**And that’s the brutal truth.**

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