

## LETTER

### Customised honesty: A new paradigm in ethical behaviour

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In an era where integrity is crucial, but under threat, the concept of "customised honesty" emerges as a nuanced approach to ethical behaviour. Unlike the traditional understanding of honesty, which adheres strictly to absolute truths, customised honesty adapts to the context, emphasising transparency and trust while considering situational dynamics. This approach fosters deeper relationships and communication that is more effective by balancing truthfulness with empathy and understanding.

Customised honesty revolves around balancing sensitivity and authenticity, tailoring communication to be truthful while respecting individual differences. This concept is grounded in various philosophies, frameworks, and theories. For example, relational dialectics theory (RDT) [1] examines the balancing of tact and honesty to maintain relationship integrity, while communication accommodation theory (CAT) [2] emphasises the adapting of communication styles to align with others' preferences, considering their emotional state and cultural background. Emotional intelligence (EI) [3] focuses on managing emotions to communicate honestly and empathetically, and ethical relativism (ER) [4] suggests adapting truthfulness to fit contextual and cultural norms. Lastly, person-centered communication (PCC) [5] defines "customised honesty as delivering truthful messages tailored to the recipient's specific context to ensure clarity and minimise discomfort".

In practice, customised honesty would involve being truthful while carefully considering how the message is conveyed, ensuring it is appropriate and sensitive to the recipient's circumstances and needs. For instance, in healthcare, customised honesty can enhance patient trust by ensuring information is conveyed compassionately and clearly, tailored to individual needs. In literature [5, 6], it was found that healthcare professionals who adapted their communication to the emotional and informational needs of patients were more successful in building trust and ensuring patient satisfaction. Similarly, in education, customised honesty encourages students to engage truthfully while respecting their personal journeys and challenges. The literature [4,7] highlighted that when educators approach honesty with empathy, students are more likely to be honest about their difficulties, fostering a supportive learning environment.

However, the flexibility inherent in customised honesty demands a robust ethical framework to prevent manipulation or deceit. It requires individuals to possess a strong moral compass and the ability to discern when and how to adapt their honesty appropriately. The subjective nature of customised honesty can lead to ethical ambiguity, where the distinction between honesty and deception becomes blurred [8]. This ambiguity can be particularly dangerous in professional settings, where critical information might be withheld under the guise of protecting others' feelings, potentially resulting in serious consequences.

Furthermore, the reliance on individual judgement to determine the appropriate level of honesty can be problematic. Without clear ethical guidelines, there is a risk that customised honesty will be used to rationalise dishonesty, eroding moral standards and accountability. There is a need for clear ethical boundaries and a culture of integrity to ensure that customised honesty is not misused. Inconsistent application of this approach can lead to confusion and conflict, undermining trust rather than building it [9].

Establishing clear ethical boundaries and promoting a culture of integrity are essential to prevent the potential misuse of this nuanced approach, which represents a sophisticated evolution in ethical behaviour, promoting integrity while accommodating the complexities of human interactions. It encourages us to strive for honesty that not only adheres to factual accuracy but also respects the emotional and situational context, paving the way for more meaningful and trustworthy relationships. While this approach has its benefits, including fostering empathy and situational awareness, it also carries significant risks that must be carefully managed to maintain ethical standards and public trust.

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