A couple of recent news stories got me thinking about the confluence of practicality and morality that should inform effective computer incident response.

The first case may seem silly: Richard Marson, the editor of a popular child’s show called “Blue Peter” on the British Broadcasting television network was suspended in September (2007) “after it emerged that the wrong name had been chosen for the new Blue Peter cat in an online poll.”[^1] Apparently the children wanted “Cookie” but upper management allegedly ordered the staff to chose “Socks” – and Mr Marson is taking the consequences.

The second news report is much more serious and will touch many readers deeply. In brief, there is overwhelming evidence that US Army doctors have been deliberately lying about the medical condition of veterans returning from the US invasion of Iraq.[^2] In many documented cases, the doctors have unjustifiably labeled wounded veterans as suffering from pre-existing personality disorders. The wounded veterans are therefore denied their well-deserved medical benefits because they are discharged under Regulation 635-200, Chapter 5-13. The benefits withheld are estimated in the tens of billions of dollars and many of the veterans and their families are suffering severe financial woes. Worse, new investigations reveal that assurances of independent review of the situation made by MAJ GEN Gale Pollock, acting surgeon general of the Army, are outright lies.[^3] Pollock claimed that she had ordered a “comprehensive review … conducted by a panel of health experts” but a single reviewer, COL Steven Knorr, was the only author of the first report. Knorr was in fact one of the psychiatrists allegedly mislableing many of the wounded veterans as suffering from the pre-existing personality disorders being contested. As a result of the scandal, Rep. Bob Filner (D-CA)[^4], chair of the House Committee on Veterans’ Affairs, scheduled public hearings on the matter in July 2007. The investigations continue.

In both of these cases, the dishonesty of managers has resulted in embarrassment and additional expenses for their organizations. Employees have been scrambling to gather information more quickly than they would have under normal circumstances; public relations staff are undoubtedly working overtime – and perhaps making yet more mistakes because of the pressures to recover credibility. Supervisory bodies have been dragged into investigations. I’m sure that morale among employees is damaged. Ironically, both organizations are governmental or quasi-governmental: they’re supposed to be working for their people – so what are managers doing lying to the public?

Dishonesty is demoralizing to everyone – managers and employees alike; lying destroys the web of trust that encourages honesty and forthrightness in all aspects of our work. Dishonesty breeds more dishonesty; I would expect an increase in petty theft, inaccurate and misleading reports.
designed to please upper management, and absenteeism. In addition, lying opens the 
organization to blackmail.

In contrast with the duplicity shown in these cases, there is a famous case of openness and 
honesty during incident response. “In February 1998, Vladimir Levin was convicted to three 
years in prison by a court in New York City. Levin masterminded a major conspiracy in 1994 in 
which the gang illegally transferred $12M in assets from Citibank to a number of international 
bank accounts. The crime was spotted after the first $400,000 were stolen in July 1994 and 
Citibank cooperated with the FBI and Interpol to track down the criminals. Levin was also 
ordered to pay back $240,000, the amount he actually managed to withdraw before he was 
arrested.”  

Citibank openly discussed the hacker attack and nominated Steve Katz as the financial industry’s first 
Chief Information Security Officer. I recall thinking at the time of the breach that Citibank’s surprisingly low loss of customer confidence was due to its forthright and honest policy of telling the truth about the incident and its response.

So let’s do what our moms always told us when we were kids: don’t lie!

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Readers interested in veterans’ affairs may want to read the report of the “Task Force on 
Returning Global War on Terror Heroes” presented to President Bush in April 2007. I hope that many people will express genuine, operational 
support for our veterans by communicating with their members of Congress and Senators 
ensuring that the Task Force recommendations are carried out.

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