

LAW 12: The Power of Selective Honesty

Law 12 of *The 48 Laws of Power* explores how selective honesty and well-timed generosity can be powerful tools for gaining influence and controlling outcomes. People are naturally suspicious of manipulation, but an occasional act of honesty or selflessness can lower their defenses, making them more susceptible to future persuasion. By strategically offering something of value—whether material or emotional—one can create an illusion of sincerity, leading others to trust and depend on them.

A striking historical example of this law in action is the case of Francesco Giuseppe Borri, a 17th-century Milanese adventurer known for his extravagant lifestyle and seemingly limitless wealth. Borri built a reputation for generosity, refusing to accept money and giving freely, which led people to believe he possessed a secret source of wealth, possibly even the legendary philosopher's stone. However, his eventual disappearance, along with the fortunes of those who placed their trust in him, revealed that his apparent honesty and benevolence were calculated tactics designed to manipulate perception and secure financial gains.

Count Victor Lustig, a legendary con artist, also demonstrated the effectiveness of selective honesty in his dealings with the infamous gangster Al Capone. Lustig convinced Capone to hand over \$50,000 with a promise to double the money through investments. Instead of attempting to increase the funds, Lustig later returned the full amount, feigning failure. Capone, taken aback by the unexpected honesty, rewarded Lustig with \$5,000—proof that even criminals can be disarmed by a well-executed display of integrity.

This principle is rooted in the psychological tendency of people to believe that honesty is a sign of trustworthiness, often overlooking underlying motives. By offering small truths or acts of kindness, manipulators can create an image of reliability, making it easier to deceive when it truly matters. From ancient China's strategic royal marriages to the deception of the Trojan Horse, history is filled with examples where generosity and sincerity were used as weapons to weaken enemies and gain access to power.

In political and military history, selective generosity has been a tool for diffusing resistance and converting adversaries into allies. The Romans, for example, used acts of calculated kindness when dealing with the city of the Faliscans, whose loyalty was won not through force, but through unexpected magnanimity. Such strategies illustrate how even in warfare, a display of goodwill can serve as a more effective conquest strategy than brute force alone.

Beyond history, this law applies in business, negotiations, and everyday relationships, where an occasional act of goodwill can open doors and create valuable opportunities. Successful entrepreneurs and leaders often give first—whether in the form of free trials, bonuses, or helpful advice—knowing that the recipient will feel inclined to reciprocate later. Similarly, in social interactions, those who strategically show vulnerability or offer genuine assistance can quickly build trust, making it easier to gain influence when needed.

However, while this law can be an effective tool for influence, it must be used sparingly and with purpose. Overuse of generosity can make others complacent or suspicious, while excessive honesty can reveal too much and weaken one's position. The key lies in balancing sincerity with strategy, ensuring that acts of kindness serve a long-term advantage rather than being mere gestures of goodwill.

Ultimately, Law 12 teaches that power often lies in perception, and by mastering the art of selective honesty and generosity, one can shape how they are viewed. People are drawn to those who appear transparent and giving, making them more likely to overlook potential deception. By carefully crafting an image of sincerity, individuals can create trust, lower resistance, and secure the power they seek while remaining seemingly benevolent in the eyes of others.