

wasn't being completely honest. Of these three factors, the importance of the information lied about proved to be the key factor in provoking a relational crisis (McCornack & Levine, 1990). We may be able to cope with "misdemeanor" lying, but "felonies" are a grave threat—often leading to the end of a relationship.

The lesson here is clear: Lying about major parts of your relationship can have the gravest of consequences. If preserving a relationship is important to you, then honesty—at least about important matters—really does appear to be the best policy.

**Equivocation** Lying isn't the only alternative to self-disclosure. When faced with the choice between lying and telling an unpleasant truth, communicators can—and often do—equivocate. **Equivocal language** has two or more equally plausible meanings.

The value of equivocation becomes clear when you consider the alternatives. Consider the dilemma of what to say when you've been given an unwanted present—an ugly painting, for example—and the giver asks what you think of it. How can you respond? On the one hand, you need to choose between telling the truth and lying. At the same time, you have a choice of whether to make your response clear or vague. Figure 3.5 displays these choices.

A study by Sandra Metts and her colleagues (1992) shows how equivocation can save face in difficult situations. Several hundred college students were asked how they would turn down unwanted sexual overtures from a person whose feelings were important to them: a close friend, a prospective

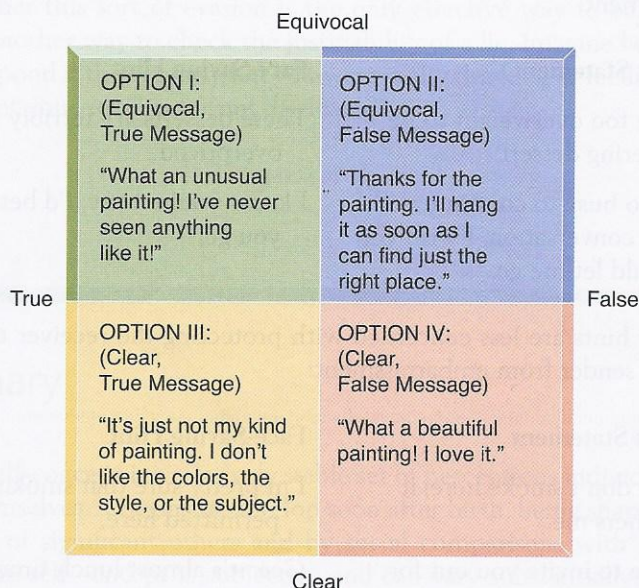


FIGURE 3.5 Dimensions of Truthfulness and Equivocation