

Laura Talbot has been employed at CAS manufacturing for nearly 15 years. During that time she has steadily moved up the ladder. Now she is head researcher in a special products division. She is very happy working for CAS and likes the community where she lives. She would be perfectly content to work at CAS until retirement. In addition she feels a strong sense of loyalty to CAS. However a complication has arisen for Laura. She has been offered a very attractive position at a firm in another town. She seeks the advice of several good friends including you.

Meanwhile, you have been serving on the long range planning committee for CAS. Although no definite plans have been formulated, the president of CAS has indicated to your committee that he is contemplating the elimination of some of CAS's divisions. Laura's division is on the list to be eliminated. The president has instructed the Committee that he wants this kept strictly confidential so that employee morale is not needlessly affected. The spreading of rumors, warns the president, can serve no useful purpose. Laura has to decide about the job offer within the next three days. Since the president will be out of the country for the next two weeks (vacationing and contemplating the future of CAS), neither you nor Laura has time to consult with him.

What do you say when Laura approaches you and asks: "This job offer looks awfully attractive, but I really like it here too. How do things look to you at CAS? What do you think I can expect from CAS down the road? To what extent, if any, should your answer to Laura be affected by your close friendship with her? What if you and Laura were not friends at all?"

ANSWER: In this case you have a duty of confidentiality, but it seems to be relatively weak. It does not override your duty of friendship to Laura in the circumstances. If you didn't reveal the president's possible plans to her, and she lost her job as a result, she would be justified in feeling very badly let down by you. Even if Laura isn't your friend you would be justified in disclosing the information to her, although it isn't clear you would be morally obligated to do so. You would be justified in telling her because the evil you could prevent (or more precisely, the expected value of that evil) would be significantly greater than the evil caused by revealing the information. In this connection the president may have made a bad judgment when he concluded that his plans should be held in confidence. Many authorities on employment relations take the view that in circumstances of this kind potentially affected employees should receive early notification that their jobs may be at risk.

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