

# Responsibilities in the Employer-Employee Relationship

December 15, 2010/

/in Beyond Compliance, Ethical Culture, Insights, Management, Resources, Workplace Culture

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<http://business.josephsoninstitute.org/blog/2010/12/15/responsibilities-in-the-employer-employee-relationship/>

The employer-employee relationship should not be looked at simply in economic terms. It is a significant human relationship of mutual dependency that has great impact on the people involved. A person's job, like a person's business, are highly valued possessions that pervasively affect the lives of the employees and their families. With stakeholders everywhere, the relationship is laden with moral responsibilities.

The employer has a moral obligation to look out for the welfare of employees. It is not a question only of fair pay and good working conditions, there should be a real and enduring concern for employees. Companies should be loyal to workers as well as shareholders. Layoffs, plant closings, and other dramatic events of this nature should be handled with caring and sensitivity and as acts of great moral significance. The use of new euphemisms such as "down-sizing" or "right-sizing" may make managers feel better about the decision to terminate jobs, but it does not change anything from a moral perspective.

As already discussed, employees are entitled to be treated fairly and with respect, and it is the company's obligation to see that individual managers do not abuse their power or mistreat their subordinates. Kill-the-messenger behaviour at any management level is improper, as is any active or passive encouragement of dishonest reporting. Employees should feel free to raise ethical or other issues without fear of retaliation. Employees are entitled to count on the commitments of the employer especially about central matters such as pay, raises, and promotions. Employers who chisel employees, renege on promises, or treat them as if they were simply instrumentalities of the organization's interests rather than ends in and of themselves fail to meet their moral responsibilities.

Employees also have moral obligations, and they go beyond giving a full day's work for a full day's pay. Loyalty goes both ways. Employees have moral duties to the organization, co-workers, and customers. If an employer were secretly to look for a

replacement for an employee by conducting interviews behind the employee's back, most employees would consider that an act of betrayal. "Why didn't you tell me my job was at risk?" "Why didn't you tell me that you were unhappy with my work so I had a chance to improve?" Does the employee owe the employer less? When an employee, without any notice to an employer secretly looks for a new job, often covering up interviewing time with deceptions or lies, is the conduct any less untrustworthy?

When an employer decides to let an employee go, it is generally thought that the employer should give the employee ample notice or severance pay. But what of the ethics of the employee who walks into the boss' office and says, "I have an opportunity I can't turn down and they need me to start this Friday"? Because of the disparity in power, many employees adopt a double standard that gives them more leeway than they afford the employer. One aspect of this attitude draws on the doubtful assertions of necessity. Another is the implicit belief that if an offer is too good to refuse, there is no moral obligation to refuse. It doesn't take much scrutiny to see that these are self-serving rationalizations. The moral obligations of an employee include loyalty, candor, caring and respect. The mismatch in economic strength between the employer and the employee does not change that.

People of character take into account their moral obligations to their employer before they interview for another job. If they know that their departure will jeopardize the organization, co-workers, or customers they should make it clear at the job interview that they are not available until they have provided a reasonable transition. If we are not certain how much hardship departure may cause, the principle of respect suggests that the parties most affected be given an opportunity to participate in a discussion to suggest the least harmful alternative. Because the employee-employer relationship operates in the context of business, there is a tendency to play by different rules dictated by who has the leverage, and principles of expediency — what you can get away with — rather than moral principle.

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