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PROFESSIONAL PRACTICE

Instruct

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Ethical Dilemma

Introduction: Ethical Dilemmas in Education as a Learning Exercise

Ethical conflicts are inevitable in the high-stakes world of education, where loyalty to colleagues, responsibility to students, and institutional demands often collide. This narrative explores a fictional scenario faced by a department administrator, designed to challenge the authors ability to navigate competing values – such as *care* for individuals, *professional principles*, *equity*, and *justice* – in the absence of clear answers.

The story, characters, and resolution are entirely hypothetical, crafted not to replay reality but to isolate and examine the tensions that shape ethical decision-making in education.

1. Narrative

As Dean of the Music and Art Department at Big Valley College, I oversee a thriving program where student achievements have garnered significant recognition. Recently, the College President confided in me about financial pressures, specifically citing the Graphic Design program as a resource drain due to declining enrollment. This follows increased competition from Interior College's nearby program, which has lured local students away.

The President proposed a confidential "program swap": transferring our Graphic Design program to Interior College in exchange for their highly profitable Business Administration program. He stressed this was tentative and requested absolute secrecy to avoid destabilizing enrollment.

During a weekend figure skating practice for my daughter's figure-skating team, where I've known instructor Grigory -- a Graphic Design faculty member -- since high school, Grigory urgently asked if rumors about the swap were true, as he and his wife were finalizing a mortgage. His livelihood and financial security hung in the balance, yet I was bound by the President's directive.

2. Dilemma

This situation presents an ethical dilemma because it forces a choice between conflicting core values. At its heart, I risk causing harm to a trusted friend through either action or inaction, while upholding institutional obligations. Three values clash most acutely:

- **Care:** My decade-long relationship with Grigory—rooted in shared community ties and family bonds—demands compassion. Care ethics prioritizes his immediate well-being; dismissing his anxiety would betray our personal and professional trust, especially given his daughters play with mine.
- **Professional Principles:** As an administrator, I must adhere to confidentiality agreements with the President. Breaching this undermines institutional trust and could jeopardize the potential

swap, harming the college's financial stability. The Society for Teaching and Learning in Higher Education emphasizes avoiding conflicts of interest, yet here institutional loyalty conflicts with personal responsibility.

- **Equity:** Grigory faces an uneven burden—he lacks critical information needed for life-altering financial decisions, while the administration holds all power. Equity requires fair access to data affecting one's livelihood, yet revealing rumors could trigger panic among *a//* Graphic Design staff, deepening inequities.
- **Justice:** Universal principles demand truthfulness, but "justice" here is fractured—fairness to Grigory versus fairness to the institution's broader mission. Critically, this mirrors insider trading: possessing non-public information that directly impacts another's financial vulnerability.
- **Cultural Values:** While less direct, there's an element of respect for individuals needing to plan their lives, a value prominent in many cultures.

The dilemma lies in balancing my obligations to the institution (confidentiality, strategic goals) with my moral obligations to a colleague and a friend (honesty, care, fairness). The President's request to maintain secrecy clashes directly with the principles of openness and trust essential for a healthy working relationship with faculty. The potential consequence of my silence—financial hardship for Grigory and his family—heightens the ethical weight of the situation.

These conflict values make it challenging to determine the right course of action, as each value has a valid claim on my decision.

3. Framework

I applied a framework of consulting a peer. I approached Dr. Elena Rossi, a respected Provost with experience in departmental restructuring. Initially, she affirmed my loyalty to the President but stressed that protecting employees from preventable harm is a core administrative duty. She noted that while confidentiality is standard, *absolute* silence when livelihoods are at stake violates higher professional principles.

Dr. Rossi proposed: "Warn him generically without confirming specifics. Say, 'Given market volatility in creative fields, I'd advise delaying major purchases until you secure long-term faculty contracts.' This upholds care without breaching confidentiality." She also urged me to escalate the issue to the President immediately, arguing that systemic transparency – not secrecy – is the ethical antidote to such dilemmas.

Action Plan:

1. Privately tell Grigory my comment verbatim (non-specific, risk-averse advice).
2. Schedule a meeting with the President to advocate for early, anonymized staff notifications about program uncertainties.
3. Propose a college-wide policy requiring contingency plans (e.g., severance timelines) for faculty in at-risk programs.

4. Alternatives

Several possible ways to solve the dilemma include:

- **Disclose the full truth to Grigory:** Rooted in *Care* and *Equity*, this prioritizes his immediate safety. Benefit: He avoids financial ruin. Risk: The swap collapses if rumors spread, destabilizing enrollment and harming the college's finances—and other faculty.
- **Maintain absolute silence:** Aligned with *Professional Principles* (confidentiality) and *Justice* (keeping promises). Benefit: Preserves institutional trust. Risk: Grigory's family faces foreclosure if he loses his job, violating *Care* and *Equity*.
- **Non-specific warning** (chosen): Balances *Care* (prompting caution) with *Professional Principles* (avoiding confirmation). Benefit: Mitigates harm without confirming rumors. Risk: Grigory may still misinterpret advice, but it respects organizational protocols while acknowledging human vulnerability.

Each alternative is guided by a different set of values, ranging from professional principles to care and justice.

5. Resolution

I implemented the non-specific warning. After consulting Dr. Rossi, I told Grigory: "With creative industries shifting constantly, I'd never advise signing a mortgage without ironclad job security. Wait for contract renewals."

I then met the President, arguing that while secrecy was understandable, withholding information that triggers existential risks for employees is unsustainable. He agreed to brief department heads within 30 days if the swap progressed.

This choice honored *Professional Principles* by not breaching confidentiality explicitly, while *Care* and *Equity* were addressed through actionable, non-leaking guidance. It avoided the extremes of betrayal (disclosure) or negligence (silence), preserving institutional trust without sacrificing Grigory's dignity.

6. Reflection

Initially, I leaned toward full disclosure—letting *Care* override all else. Consulting Dr. Rossi reshaped my view: ethical leadership requires systems, not just situational mercy. I realized confidentiality without harm-mitigation protocols is inherently inequitable.

If this were real, I'd have pushed the President harder for transparent contingency talks *before* rumors surfaced, ensuring staff had timelines for decisions.

This dilemma crystallized that "protection" via secrecy often masks institutional cowardice; true professionalism means building structures where such ethical traps can't form.

Moving forward, I'd embed equity checks in all strategic decisions – because when one person's crisis is treated as gossip, the entire system loses integrity.

7. Conclusion

This exercise invites reflection on how ethical reasoning sharpens leadership, turning intuition into strategic empathy. I let the fictionality of the scenario liberate my thinking – because preparing for real dilemmas demands wrestling with messy, human contradictions before they strike.

In hindsight, my non-specific advice was a stopgap – not a substitute for systemic transparency. It minimized harm in the moment, but left unresolved structural deficiencies surrounding faculty job insecurity.

This exercise shows that ethical dilemmas often require navigating gray areas where perfect solutions don't exist. While balancing care, professional principles, and equity can be complex, it is possible to mitigate damage through layered strategies: immediate compassionate actions paired with long-term institutional reform.