

Questions for Mr Ethicist

Real questions from people facing dilemmas:

1. *I attend an Ivy League university where students are graded on a curve. During a midterm, the student next to me was copying answers from my paper. Because a higher score for her would mean a lower grade for me, I intentionally wrote some incorrect answers, waited until she handed in her test booklet and then changed my answers to the correct ones. Was this wrong? — Brenna Tinkel, Philadelphia.*
2. *I discovered that my supervisor routinely reads employee e-mail. Legal issues aside, is this ethical? I can understand doing so if a crime is suspected, but not as a matter of routine. It feels like a violation of my privacy. What do you think? — Anonymous, New York.*
3. *A senior manager with a consulting firm, I often interview job candidates. My role is both to evaluate them and to “sell” them on our firm, a place I’ve grown less enamored of. In fact, I’m seeking other employment. What do I tell candidates who ask my opinion of the firm? If I tell the truth, I harm my firm’s chance to land them; but a lie is unfair to the candidate. And I can’t avoid doing the interview. — Anonymous, Mass.*
4. *I recently received a job offer, which I orally accepted. When I approached my current employer with my resignation, he made a counteroffer. I now wish to remain with my current employer. Is it correct to revoke my acceptance of the original offer? — Anonymous*
5. *I am on the board of a hospital raising funds for a necessary extension. A local businessman with known ties to organized crime has offered a substantial donation. Should we take the money? — S. Wagner, Stamford, Conn.*
6. *I am a state-certified mediator and arbitrator. Recently I mediated a serious dispute to the satisfaction of both parties. One of them, an American-born Japanese businessman, offered to send me a special fish, prepared for eating, as a token of appreciation. I humbly refused the gift as a violation of my code of ethics. He was hurt by my rejection of his Japanese custom, meant only to express appreciation. Was I wrong? — Abraham Best, Lauderhill, Fla.*
7. *I have an opportunity to buy the property of my dreams. The problem is that the elderly couple who have lived there for more than 40 years love the house and assume that I will maintain it. I intend to tear it down and build a more modern house on this beautiful property. If I reveal my plan, they may refuse to sell me the house and land. Am I ethically bound to tell? — W.S., Maryland*
8. *My mother wants to hire someone to clean house and handle the laundry. To assure this person’s integrity, she plans to leave loose money around as “bait” during the housecleaner’s first few days of work. Here in Brazil, those stray bills can constitute a significant percentage of a housecleaner’s wages. My mother sees this “trap” as a perfectly ethical precaution. Do you? — Daniel Hutchins, Juiz de Fora, Brazil*

9. *I've been happily married for 21 years. Ten years ago, my husband suffered a debilitating disease that keeps us from making love. Four years ago, I bumped into an ex-lover, himself married, and began a sexual relationship, reawakening my sexual feelings. Neither of us would ever divorce. I'm sure I can keep this relationship secret, so my husband will not get hurt. My devout Catholicism forbids such an affair, but does secular ethics? — Anonymous*
10. *An acquaintance who works for a mutual fund regularly visits Japan to meet with companies in which the fund invests. Brokerage firms that do business with the fund set up the meetings and provide translators. Executives of the companies he visits assume he does not speak Japanese and hold private conversations in his presence that could affect investment decisions. My acquaintance needs a translator's help with some technical terms but easily handles conversational Japanese. Must he divulge this to those executives? — Daniel Gottlieb, Los Gatos, Calif.*
11. *I have an employee with no health insurance — he opted out of our company plan — with a wife and children who rely on his income. He has been loyal and productive. I have no bad things to say about him. Recently he was diagnosed with cancer and will not be able to perform his job. Should I continue to pay his salary even after he stops working? How should employers handle such situations? — Eric Markowitz, Brooklyn*
12. *I am a subspecialty physician without primary responsibility for patients. I consulted on the care of the C.E.O. of a major company, the seriousness of whose illness was not being fully disclosed to shareholders. I own stock in this company. Once I complete my consultation, may I ethically sell my shares, motivated by the information I gained as a doctor? — Anonymous, Texas*
13. *I bid for art on eBay. A fellow collector whose taste parallels mine often bids against me. He suggested that we agree not to bid on the same prints, so that we don't "drive up the prices." This would benefit us, but wouldn't it be unfair to the seller, who would have less competition and lower prices? I resisted, but I can't quite figure out why it feels wrong. Is it? — Christine Bridges, New York*
14. *Our medical practice discovered that a recently discharged office administrator misappropriated several thousand dollars. The police were notified. This fellow then asked if we could "work things out" and avoid the legal system. Some of the physicians are willing to not press charges if he reimburses us. I feel we have an obligation to society and to potential future employers to continue with the criminal-justice system. Agreed? — name withheld, New Jersey*
15. *After I worked for months as a management consultant, my client became increasingly hard to pin down for payments due. I then withdrew, halfway through the project, for lack of funds. May I recoup some of my costs by using material I produced for him for future clients? May I share documents he provided, even if they might contain confidential information? (We have no nondisclosure agreement.) — Anonymous, Montreal*

16. *A colleague helped my wife and me find an apartment in a row house. A longstanding oral agreement gives him first refusal should the owner want to sell the building. Recently the owner offered to sell me the building, asking me not to tell my colleague. I think we must inform him — he got us the apartment. My wife disagrees; she says business is business. You? — M.D., New Jersey*
17. *I am a 13-year-old boy. My school has a monthly pizza sale. Parents buy pies from a pizzeria and sell them to us for \$1 a slice. I bought a whole pie at the pizzeria and offered slices for \$2 to kids at the end of the long line. A school counselor stopped me. She said that I was unethical and was "taking advantage of people." I thought I was providing a service to people based on the principle that "time is money." Who is right? — Ben Gammage, San Diego*