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# Loyalty v. truth: Are they opposing ideas?

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In the world of ethics, we often consider certain values as the underpinnings that drive what is and isn't ethical. What happens, though, when conflicting values seem to create a conundrum? That question recently piqued my interest during a classroom exercise involving the question of what creates conflict with respect to public servants engaging the public. In the classic book, *How Good People Make Tough Choices*,[1] the late ethics professor Rushworth Kidder presents two types of moral or political decisions: "wrong v. right" and "right v. right." It is the latter to which we shift, as most of our ethical dilemmas involve riding the horns of what are ostensibly good and proper decisions. Right v. right decisions involve deeply held values, none of which are morally wrong but that are juxtaposed without any apparent way to harmonize both—or in some cases, all—positions.

Kidder identifies four primary manifestations of these "right" decisions. Briefly, there are (i) justice v. mercy, in which fairness, equity, and consistent application of the law conflict with compassion, empathy, and love; (ii) short-term v. long-term time horizons, which reflect the tension between present and future goals and perspectives; and (iii) individual v. community needs, or what may be seen as "us v. them" or "a majority need v. a minority need."

It is the fourth problem where we'll linger: (iv) truth vs. loyalty. In this conflict, Kidder indicates the interest of honesty and integrity wars with promise keeping or commitment. It is often framed as the dilemma between telling the truth or staying loyal to a person. For instance, an example would involve your boss telling you about upcoming layoffs, which includes your best friend, but asks you to keep it to yourself. Do you stay loyal to your boss, or, if the friend asks you, do you tell the truth? With that, let's take time to parse this.

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