

From an Ethics Statement: “In carrying out the business of _____, you often learn confidential or proprietary information about _____, its customers, prospective customers or others. It is your responsibility to maintain the confidentiality of all information entrusted to you – except when disclosure is authorized or legally required.”

Does this sort of thing apply only to large companies? Not likely. Think about an employee responsible for a company’s finances. Is her secretary likely to learn confidential information as she goes about her duties? It is difficult to see how that would not happen.

Does having an ethics code or requiring an employee to sign some sort of confidentiality agreement necessarily protect the employer? It helps, of course, but the sharing of confidential information with a secretary, assistant, colleague, or spouse can cause embarrassing and perhaps expensive results.

One way to think about this is if the boss is unethical or “blabs” to others about confidential information, it will be difficult for her to expect those who work for her to adhere to a standard that the boss herself ignores. This, therefore, is a situation where a culture of keeping information appropriately secret becomes important. The boss must lead by example, and must do so free of hypocrisy, the arch-enemy of good ethical behavior.

Another aspect of this problem is that in many companies, there may be circumstances where confidential information is shared at a meeting that is recorded on audio or video, perhaps for the benefit of some important person who planned to attend but could not. Some companies simply have a blanket rule that says something like “sorry, no recording under any circumstances.”

Here are some instances that require vigilance:

- (a) Employees starting a conversation in the workplace and continuing it in the elevator where, usually, there are folks who have no business hearing confidential information;
- (b) Employees talking loudly to their spouses over cocktails about confidential matters while dining with others at the country club or the local pub; and
- (c) Those who insist on speaking on their cell phones in crowded places, blithely talking about stuff that should not have been heard by strangers.

The probability that those hearing confidential material will not remember what they heard is beside the point. A regular reminder to employees of the need to keep matters confidential is a good practice for an ethical business.

During World War II, there were lots of posters around carrying this message: *Loose Lips Sink Ships*. Change the language a bit and it is still good advice.