

HEARTS OF THE CITY

Exploring
attitudes and
issues behind
the news.

The Beat

The **Child Advocates Office** of Los Angeles recruits and trains volunteers to act as advocates for abused or neglected children who are wards of the Los Angeles County Dependency Court. For more information, call (213) 526-6666.

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Navigating the Real World

A rotating panel of experts from the worlds of ethics, psychology and religion offer their perspective on the dilemmas that come with living in Southern California.

Today's Question: How frank should you be when asked about the performance and character of your employee or co-worker who is being considered for a better job by a possible new employer? Let's say the person is fairly competent but has been an irritating, disruptive and unhappy presence at your workplace despite a positive first impression.

Orli Peter

Associate professor of psychology; director, psychology graduate programs, Mount St. Mary's College

References that provide frank or muted assessments of a flawed job candidate risk adverse consequences, such as an angry employee or a loss of credibility. In deciding how to respond, employers typically try to balance their own values, loyalties and the cultural norms of the workplace. They may want to be frank because of their loyalty to the profession, or a desire to undermine a worker, or a belief that lying is wrong. Simultaneously, they may be driven to be less than frank due to cultural expectations, or from a desire either to help a worker or get rid of an irritant. When conflicts among values, loyalties and norms create an insurmountable ethical bind, one may always decline to provide a reference.

Leonard Pelkoff

Chairman emeritus, Ayn Rand Institute; talk show host, KJEV-AM

Never lie in such cases, but always hold the context. If the new employer is your friend, he is entitled to know the facts and your suspicions about the man. If the candidate is your friend, then speak up for him warmly—if you can't do it truthfully, you shouldn't be friends. Aside from such special cases, be frank—but only about objectively provable facts. A person's "unhappiness," for example, may be a character trait, or it may spring merely from frustration at the present job. If you don't know which, it is unfair to mention it.

Scott Rae

Associate professor, Talbot School of Theology, Biola University; co-author of "Beyond Integrity, a Judeo-Christian Approach to Business Ethics"

Assuming that I'm being asked in an unofficial capacity, I see no reason why I could not be fairly forthcoming about my impressions of my co-worker. If, for example, this person has me listed as a reference, and the prospective employer calls me for my input, then I have no problem with encouraging the potential employer to be alert to particular traits that have caused problems in our workplace. I would, of course, speak just as forthrightly to the person's strengths too, in order to help the potential employer to see his strengths as well as weaknesses. Most references are useless to potential employers because people are not forthcoming.