

Can Promises be Broken?

In general, promises need to be respected and kept. We often say “Promises are promises.” Keeping promises is a mark of good character, loyalty, and of a trustworthy colleague. Breaking promises can hurt many. But, maybe sometimes promises can be broken. It seems that you can break promises when the circumstances of the promise change or evolve, or when the promise has an unexpected destructive effect. Also consider that promises can be broken to do an unexpected much greater good, or when there is no loss of benefit to anyone, or when it was made without full knowledge of the details and the consequences. What about when the promise was made under stress, duress, threats, or mental illness?

This is relevant to collegiality because in the course of routine working and living, promises among colleagues are often casually made or elicited. We all want to be a good person and citizen, so we respect our promises and try to keep them. We are anguished by the thought of or by circumstances that suggest we break them. But, would you keep a promise when it means covering up a crime, for example? Would you keep a promise that you were more or less argued into but in fact it is one that prevents fairness or justice? There are many possibilities, and our collegial bargains and promises can be complicated. This can be a difficult topic and perhaps conflict resolution may be a helpful tool.