Whistleblowing: Harnessing outrage for the greater good *Tim Parkman, Managing Director, Lessons Learned Ltd*

If you’re about to press the button on the launch of your new whistleblowing policy (large UK financial institutions, take note), then your troubles are just about to start. You may have your ‘whistleblowing champion’ in place, you may have installed your hotline, amended your settlement agreements and put all the other necessary arrangements in place. But, as ever, the acid test of your new and improved policy will be whether people actually use it to make disclosures. And in this regard, the likelihood is that they’ll take some persuading.

Deep down, at the level of the central nervous system, most people know or suspect that becoming a whistleblower is going to take them to some scary places. It can often mean moving, voluntarily, from a position deep in the heart of the herd, surrounded by the comforting hides of all the other people who haven’t noticed a thing, right over to its most extreme and vulnerable edges. And with predators circling as night falls, the truth is that’s one journey that most people aren’t going to want to make - particularly relatively happy, comfortable and successful ones.

The question is: How then do you motivate uncertain people who have everything to live for (and consequently everything to lose) to take their working lives in their hands and blow the whistle rather than swallow it? Back in the day, when I was on the other end of the phone to whistleblowers from time to time, I learned to recognize something in some of them which I came to treat as a good sign; and it was, quite simply, outrage – the feeling people get when they’ve decided they’re no longer prepared to put up with whatever abuse it is that they’ve become aware of. Unburdened by more complex motives, angry people will often be those who possess the courage and determination to take it all the way. And one way of putting people in touch with their angry side and increasing both the quantity and the quality of reports is to remind them from time to time of how of criminals within organizations think.

So often, in the minds of people engaged in some kind of illegal behaviour, whether it’s a corrupt official in a government department accepting bribes into their offshore bank account, or a powerful corporate manager lining their own pockets, there’s a four stage thought process that goes something like this:

*No.1 No-one will notice (“they’re too busy”)*

*No. 2 If it is noticed, it won’t get reported (“they’re too scared”)*

*No. 3 If it’s reported, it won’t be investigated (“the politics are too awkward”); and*

*No. 4 If it’s investigated, someone will protect me (“I’m indispensable and I know too much”)*

And what you say to people is this. That whereas it’s true that at most pay grades there’s nothing you can really do about numbers 3 and 4, nevertheless 1 and 2 lie well within your range of action as an employee of the organization. Control your controllables. And you don’t have to be a governance expert to realize that if people use the whistleblowing system to deal with 1 and 2, consistently and in good faith – anonymously if they prefer – then that starts to create real pressure further up the line for those responsible for dealing with 3 and 4. To the extent, actually, that it becomes untenable for the top management of an organization to handle matters in that way.

Whistleblowing will always remain deeply counter-intuitive to many people. But we also know that it’s by far the most effective way of exposing wrongdoing within organizations – three times more effective than the next best detective control according to some reports.

One of the messages to your staff should be a simple one. If it’s bad, then you’re right to be outraged. Someone should call it out – why not you?

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Lessons Learned designs and delivers persuasive, thought-provoking whistleblowing communication and training programmes. Contact Katrine Johnston on training@lessonslearned.co.uk / +44 (0)845 1567) to make an enquiry.