



Consider The Cost Before Speaking Your Mind

By John Towler PhD

It's almost inevitable that if you are part of an organization for long enough you will come across examples of waste, mismanagement and perhaps even fraud. What should you do about it? What will happen if you speak up and tell what you know? Why do some people blow the whistle while others remain silent and ignore the situation?

Saying what you think and telling what you know isn't easy. Some would say it isn't even smart. It can be rewarding after a fashion, but the process is fraught with dangers, most of which are totally unforeseen by the whistleblower. Successful cases make good press, sensational trials and even good movies.

The true stories of Karen Silkwood and her resistance to practices at a nuclear plant, Frank Serpico and police corruption, Marie Raghianti and the Tennessee Board of Pardon and Paroles have all been made into movies that have popularized the ideal that truth conquers all and that right will prevail. However, this isn't always the case. More and more, social scientists are turning their attention to why some people speak out, what happens to them as a result, and how they can be helped to handle the resulting crisis they create.

It seems that those who speak out against the system have a strong belief about individual responsibility. This is often accompanied by high professional ethics, religious values and a genuine concern about the company, organization, customers and community. These resisters often suffer from feelings of righteous indignation and believe that a corrupt system exists only if those in it condone what is happening and keep quiet.

In one example, a senior administrator in Canada responded to a long history of complaints from co-workers, customers, and members of the board of directors about an employee who was incompetent, employed under false pretenses and violently disruptive. She fired him. The administrator was legally within her rights to do so and many people privately supported and applauded her actions. However she was completely unprepared for the reaction of the union, the media, political pressure groups and interested outsiders.

A landmark legal battle ensued which completely vindicated her and upheld the firing. But the months of legal battles, threats to her family sensational news coverage and a general dwindling away of former friends and colleagues who didn't want to become involved took their toll and the administrator left for a saner position elsewhere.

In another case, an employee found himself working under an incompetent department head who had been hired by an even more incompetent manager. His co-workers kept out of the way of both individuals and tried to avoid following their worst, most idiotic instructions. Matters came to a head when the department head asked the employee to do something that was clearly against company policies. He refused. Later, he was called into the manager's office where his two bosses presented him with a long list of misdemeanors stretching back over three years, stopped his promised promotion, moved him to a small out of the way office and refused his request for a transfer to another department. The employee appealed to his vice president, who was sympathetic but refused to act because this was "an internal problem" that involved only one department. The employee

stuck it out for another year and then left the company. The following year the manager retired and the former boss was fired.

None of this seems fair or ethical; and it isn't. But it is what happens. Resisters who have gone through the experience offer this advice: "First, try to forget it. If you can't forget it, cover your trail and leak the information. If you can't do that, be prepared for the consequences. They may involve the loss of your job, the end of your career or bankruptcy."

If you decide that you absolutely must act here are some things to think about.

- Make sure you have all the facts and that you can prove them.
- Plan it out before you act.
- If possible, go through channels, but don't make the mistake of thinking that someone "up there" really cares about it and will support you.
- Set the horror floor and be prepared for the worst that could happen. Is it worth your job?
- Don't start unless you are prepared to see it through to the end. If you give up at any stage, you have just lost.
- Understand that you will be unfairly criticized and humiliated without any effective way to defend yourself.
- Talk it over with your family before you begin. Are they prepared for what lies ahead and able to stand the pressures? Many marriages have been torn apart in the process of proving a point.
- Realize that your life and career may never be the same. You will quickly find out who your real friends are; they stick with you, others treat you like a pariah.
- Be prepared for a high degree of stress and know how to counteract it. This means knowing who to go to for personal support and professional advice.

Therapists working with people going through these kinds of experiences have found that most can't find good professional help. Lawyers can advise you on your legal rights, but aren't able to help you plan personal strategies. Mental health workers frequently dismiss the problems as minor worker/management disputes and even the clergy are seldom equipped to help.

Standing up for what you believe in is risky and it can leave scars. But turning a blind eye and saying nothing can be just as damaging to one's self respect and satisfaction. You have to ask yourself whether you can remain silent. You may not be able to live with yourself if you stand by and do nothing.

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