Ending the Blame Game: Celebrating Truth-Seeking Inside Your Corporate Culture

By Darnell Lattal, Ph.D.

What can be done to ensure that employees bring to the attention of management the problems they see that compete with ensuring the company’s and its employees’ safety, security, and reputation? Cultural practices may inadvertently limit what companies hear because leaders really don’t want to encourage certain types of behavior. One is known as “the whistleblower.” The other type is often called “the disgruntled employee.” Can management practices address the behavior of those labeled as whistleblowers in private business and industry, facts may be the defining difference between the term whistleblower and a disgruntled employee.

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disgruntled employees and reduce the need for whistleblowing actions? Can this new way of managing replace disgruntled patterns with changes in actions that are described as cooperative, involved, and engaged? Finally, will there always be a need for whistleblowers to keep Corporate America from sliding down the slippery slope because self-interest runs too deep for individuals in those companies to do anything else other than to cover up the issues? The answer, unfortunately, is yes, but there are real changes that can help, and they start with each of us who manage the culture and context of our business environment.

**BLOWING THE WHISTLE**

The recent disclosures of Edward Snowden have started a frenzy over the meaning of the word *whistleblower*. According to Richard Haas, president of the Council on Foreign Relations, Snowden broke the law and compromised our nation’s safety. “A ‘whistleblower’ is a person who reveals wrongdoing, corruption, illegal activity. None of this applies here even if you oppose US [government] policy,” he states. When it comes to national and international security matters, the subject becomes complicated, because we still don’t know and may never know all of the facts. Whatever one may think about his motivation, the US Government has declared his actions criminal.

Once a person takes actions that are public, go beyond the boundaries of a company, or are more than bringing to the attention of the corporate body what needs to change, the whistle has been blown—and there are consequences for all at that point. Once the whistle is blown, then it is no longer simply arranging conditions so that there is less likelihood of external whistleblowing occurring when an individual wants to tell her company that something is wrong. Snowden’s actions require a different set of criteria by which to evaluate them.

Setting aside the destruction created by Snowden and his personal motivations for his actions, what can be done to ensure that employees feel supported in bringing forward concerns, even very contentious concerns, without having to take their case to the public? How might a company set up conditions to ensure that all possible problems or concerns invite honest discourse and resolution?

Renowned whistleblower Jeffrey Wigand revealed that his company (Brown and Williamson) knowingly manipulated the amount of nicotine in cigarettes to elevate smokers’ addiction. He was subsequently harassed, fired, and even received death threats, but he was in fact telling the truth. In 2002, Cynthia Cooper and Sharron Watkins exposed their companies—Worldcom and Enron, respectively—for financial scandals ultimately resulting in bankruptcy for both corporations. The result was also the unemployment of Cooper, Watkins, and countless others. Peter Rost, former vice president of Pfizer, the
behemoth pharmaceutical firm, was hounded and fired for his testimony before Congress regarding fraudulent accounting and other irregularities. And many remember the movie Silkwood portraying the true story of Karen Silkwood, who exposed unsafe practices at the Kerr-McGee nuclear plant. Some believe she paid for her whistleblowing actions with her life.

These are random picks from a deep grab bag of corporate whistleblowers whose actions led to fame and/or infamy. But their fates are warnings to those who might become whistleblowers on a smaller and less-publicized scale:

- The sales manager who encourages his sales team to sell something that is not yet ready, very close, but most likely will not make delivery on the promised date. However the sale for his unit will show up in this quarter’s sales report.

- The memorandum to a team in accounting written about the upcoming merger stating that all current employees in this unit will continue to work in the new company for at least one year. An employee asks if that is guaranteed and the manager says yes, only six weeks later to let the current staff go because new people from the acquired company are coming to take their place. The unit manager knew that the company had no real control over who would stay and who would go but he did not see what he did as a lie. He needed to keep the staff in place. That was his mandate. The employee did see it and raised the concern as an ethical one to his boss’s leadership.

- The person who verifies the inventory for the office and who raids the storage closet for supplies to furnish her newly developing side business and is observed by one of her colleagues.

REACTIONS TO THE WELL-INTENDED GOOD CITIZEN WHO RAISES SUCH CONCERNS

These small, slippery slope steps are often seen not as indicators of company culture but rather just random acts by bad hires. Those who turn in such people are often seen as good soldiers but there can be a question, seldom spoken aloud, about the ‘intention’ of an employee who turns in colleagues. Most people would deny that they ever have such questions but indeed it shapes the way such small whistle blowers are seen. For things like selling a product before it is ready, the company culture may encourage fast sales to keep them viable while they put the final touches on things. The merger language may be the necessary condition that the company believes it must use to honor the merger agreements (although there are other choices as well.) Alerting the company internally to wrong doings by employees always carries
the real threat of whistle blowing, unstated but available if there is no reaction. The responses to raising such concerns are often very difficult to manage for the employee or the company. Reactions to the future, as yet not active, whistle blower in their midst cannot be foreseen. Taking such a step is what is often called the lonely ethical step that may lead to other subtle forms of isolation. There is nothing easy about this subject for the doer or the recipient company.

In the case of whistleblowers in private business and industry, facts may be the defining difference between the term whistleblower (which is usually given a positive connotation, even a heroic flair outside the company even if bad things happen to the whistle blower) and a disgruntled (emotional, complaining, unsatisfied and/or greedy) employee. Because the association is often made between disgruntled and potentially negative and loud blowing of that whistle, let's look at how disgruntled employees enter the picture.

THE DISGRUNTLED EMPLOYEE

Disgruntlement is a label used to describe behavior a company does not want. It is a way to describe in shorthand the manager’s reactions to what the person is saying—it is a label applied to certain actions that mean for many that the disgruntled person can never be satisfied, as though the label tells us something important. In fact, it tells us nothing about the person, the concerns, or the ways information is processed, interpreted, and then expressed. It requires a hard look at what sets up the label in the first place and all-too often, the biases of and lack of behavior change skills of the observer, in particular if that observer is the person’s manager.

A company’s management practices can be designed to recognize disgruntlement for the vague description that it is. It can set up skill training for each manager so that employees receive many mini-reinforcers for appropriate expression and action at work, including acknowledgement of the employees’ ‘disgruntled’ perceptions, carefully exploring what ought to be done.

Good listening and good action in support of legitimate concern can go a long way while you as manager are learning how to reinforce small changes in tone and method that the individual adopts in interaction with you. Be direct. Don’t just wait for the person to figure it out. Tell him or her how you want issues to be addressed and then reinforce efforts to do just that. But even if the expression is not yet right, listen to the concern behind the expression. You might dismiss it once you really hear the concern, but listen first and know why you are dismissing any worker’s concerns. Find ways to reinforce the intention to do the right thing.
ESTABLISHING CONDITIONS IN WHICH DISGRUNTLEMENT THRIVES

Individuals who show disruptive emotions in words and how they use them often are motivated by the best of intentions to ensure that no harm comes to their colleagues, themselves or the larger community. Their histories of reinforcement may have taught them that the best way to be heard is to yell, show emotion, cry or belittle. However, these people who are excessive often bear a perceived burden that people could be injured or killed because they fail to get the word out. Remember, when you tune out that loud or emotionally-disruptive employee, real concerns may be motivating the performer. Judging the complainer as not worthy of listening to—because of the way the content is conveyed—is a mistake all too often made in corporate America.

Many employees may try to express themselves appropriately but make a mistake in procedure rather than necessarily in loud voices. Procedure violations in bringing a concern forward become the essential element, but are hardly the core issue that the individual is trying to address. Inflexible processes that do not allow for the rapid progression of useful information lead to many things inside corporations, including a failure to hear what could be life-saving or practice-changing advice. It often appears that cultural rules about process overshadow cultural expectations about significance. Don Nelson, a NASA employee for 36 years, the last 11 as mission operations evaluator for proposed advanced space transportation projects, became a whistleblower (after his retirement) regarding unsafe practices at NASA. He stated, “When I tried to raise my concerns with NASA’s new administrator, I received two reprimands for not going through the proper channels, which discouraged other people from coming forward. When it came to an argument between a middle-ranking engineer and the astronauts and administration, guess who won?”

Procedures are important, no doubt. Be sure they are not there just to shelter you from hearing what may be unwanted news. Recognize good intention and good effort, even if outside procedure and then look at what sets up the conditions to do a work around. It could be your managers and supervisors do not know how to manage such concerns themselves. Many who manage others know nothing about human behavior—but a lot about following the rules and the unspoken rule that you don’t want bad news coming from your area of responsibility. Teach them to analyze significance, urgency and methods of expression so that they can always attend to the meaning behind the bad word choices your employees may make. As part of your cultural rules of conduct, reinforce attending to what concerns employees have and attending to those rapidly rather than refusing to hear them because of rules about how they need
to bring those issues forward, rules related to process. Teach them objectivity when listening or observing behavior, a core element of being able to hear what is said without our own biases adding interpretation to the meaning.

Granted, some people harbor resentment toward their company and wreak havoc with false accusations. They can cause a great deal of trouble by sharing trade secrets or making illegitimate claims that nonetheless have to be handled through expensive litigation. Some people show these kinds of highly critical and disruptive behaviors early in their hiring and need immediate and specific positive consequences applied to using words in ways that can be heard, to examining their effect vs. what may be ‘good intentions.’ If they have a long history of personal reinforcement for disruptive behavior, it can be hard for them to change.

Such individuals may need to be counseled out. Not for what they might say but because of the cultural harm in how they exhibit abusive and excessive emotional responding to others. They are, once hired however, a product of how you are managing people. You can eliminate the management consequences that maintain behavior patterns identified by the label “disgruntled employee” and replace that pattern with more adaptive and still ethical and honest patterns of behavior, leaving the person feeling whole and valued.

REDUCING THE NEED FOR LOUD VOICES

Bureaucracy is an effective smoke-screen for passing the buck. Just look at the eventual fall-out regarding Bernard Madoff’s Ponzi scheme even though there were those who wondered about him—and his very controlling methods. Just what was going on and just who had access to know? In this instance, there were way too few loud voices inside his closely held company to let the world know what was happening. His blustery personality and the insulation allowed by those who resided several floors below his very private suite inside his company kept his secret all too long. In such instances it seems there will always be a need for the whistle blower. But you can take meaningful steps toward candor and disclosure so that insulation is not allowed by boards, fellow officers or your employees to support the thankfully few sociopaths who thrive on intimidation, personal power, and isolation.

Too many companies accept a leader’s negative methods, if those methods bring bottom-line profits and other favorable business metrics. Many companies want to and intend to hear from their employees. But all too few companies examine closely what they are requiring of their managers in how they listen to and respond to concerns. Not only do we run into the manager who can put up barriers, such as, “don’t bring me problems; bring me solutions” that create more barriers for the disgruntled employee; there are often Human Resources processes and procedures that describe how to address a concern. Addressing concerns is a procedure-driven process laden with a lot of what is called ‘response cost’ to the individual. The policies about bringing advice or suggestions or concerns might follow a path similar to this (based on the same logic as the White Rabbit Rules of Order as introduced in Alice in Wonderland):

• “Fill in a number of forms and sign your name.
• Be sure to talk only to your direct boss, the next person in the chain of command, about your concerns.

Workers insist that they are not disgruntled. They are very disgruntled.
—Kevin Nealon
• Do not share with others or you will look like you are trying to build a case against management.
• Acknowledge her response first.
• If you go over the boss’s head, (woe unto you) be sure you have really done all YOU can do at your boss’s level.
• Of course, you must go over her head if you think the decisions are unwise.
• If you do not do so, for fear of losing your job and something happens, guess what? You will lose your job.”

Such a policy would never be written. But keep in mind, behavior goes where reinforcement flows and such perception may exist even if the policy says “Go directly to the top if your concerns are of such significance that they cannot wait.” The things that are reinforced such as staying in process, not talking outside the unit; general head down activity, will appear to most employees to be what is wanted regardless of what the words on paper say. If a person’s boss indicates in words or subtle physical actions or expression, “don’t you dare take this up a level,” the likelihood is small that the person will take it further.

The employee’s history in any former workplace can lead as well to an interpretation that in no way reflects the feelings or beliefs of his current manager, but still, the manager must express in words and actions a desire to hear from employees about what they see that works and what does not. The culture’s unspoken rules of conduct can create a barrier to getting needed attention and it can reinforce or punish people intentionally or unintentionally when they work to bring issues to the fore. Those unspoken rules are often very subtle indeed. To address the two biggest barriers to creating an open culture, cultural rules of conduct and management practices, follow these simple guidelines:

1. Do a cultural survey designed to identify subtle rules of conduct that accelerate or impede ethical behavior at all levels.
2. Use the survey findings to make refinements to your cultural rules of conduct where whistleblowers and disgruntled employees can find a new voice of acceptance and new ways to work for the greater good of all.
3. Use the survey as baseline and repeat it at yearly or 18 month intervals to see how well you are doing in shifting your culture where employees report being free to report.
4. Help your managers and supervisors learn about how to see behavior and how to coach without threat or fear:
   • how to be objective,
   • how to reinforce speaking up more,
   • how to ensure that there are no unintended consequences for speaking up, and finally,
   • how to reinforce small steps by each employee in learning to express concerns effectively and openly. Such management practice takes time and consistency.

Aubrey Daniels International can help you design such a survey to ensure that the right behavioral support is present in your organization at all levels (see ADI’s Suite of Surveys or contact us for customizable surveys on topics such as ethical decision making). ADI
has training, coaching, and systems redesign that encourage open dialogue and employee engagement in bringing concerns to the front, without threat or fear. For more on this topic, see Whistleblowers, Disgruntled Employees and You, from Talent Magazine online.