



We need to overcome our fears and speak out, writes **Brian Martin**

The answer is blowing in the whistles

THERE are lots of good reasons to speak out. You may want to comment on a public issue, to publicise your research findings or to expose a problem in the university. But there are risks, or at least you imagine them. You think that if you offend someone powerful, this may jeopardise your tenure or promotion application. Your grants may be blocked. You may be sued for defamation. You could even be hauled in by ASIO and interrogated.

Most of these are pretty unlikely. Fears can overwhelm good sense. If you appear in the media, probably the biggest risk is that some of your peers, who think serious scholars should communicate only in academic forums, will think less of your scholarly achievements.

On the other hand, others will appreciate your public engagement.

Risks from speaking out do need to be taken seriously. This is something I've been studying for a long time. Through the years I've spoken to hundreds of dissidents and whistleblowers. A group of us edited a book titled *Intellectual Suppression*, published 20 years ago. More recently, after being president of Whistleblowers Australia and hearing case after case, I wrote *The Whistleblower's Handbook* so I wouldn't have to keep repeating the same advice.

If there is a single lesson from all this experience, it is to prepare carefully before speaking out. Preventing an attack is far better than dealing with one. Part of preparation is getting your facts right. Before sending an email claiming corruption, ring a few people to check your information and make sure you've considered other viewpoints.

This applies to scholarly work, too. Of course researchers are careful, but if the findings are potentially contentious, it's a good idea to send a draft to likely critics. Sometimes it's hard to get a response. When I wrote a book about the fluoridation controversy, I readily obtained comments from anti-fluoridationists, but it took some effort to find pro-fluoridationists willing to give feedback.

Another part of preparation is assessing likely responses. Speaking at a public meeting or rally on a matter of national importance may get you into trouble, but probably not. Usually it is far riskier to speak out about an internal matter such as mismanagement, harassment or conflict of interest within your own organisation.

An absolutely crucial part of preparation is consulting others about the most effective way to proceed. Ideally, you should talk to several people who've done just what you're planning to do. Experience is a wonderful guide.

They may advise on the text of your speech or executive summary. They may suggest waiting for a more opportune time. They may advise

joining forces with others. There is safety in numbers. Petitions are safer than solo statements. Sometimes it's necessary to act alone, but if the risks are great it's wise to spend a lot of effort building an alliance.

Even with the best preparation, there are no guarantees. There is a lot of contingency in attacks. If you do come under attack for speaking out, there are some predictable patterns. Attackers usually prefer to operate behind the scenes. They may put a quiet word to your superiors. They may engineer for your paper to be withdrawn from a conference or your speaking slot moved and shortened. You may receive veiled threats.

Sometimes, after you speak out, your students and supportive colleagues suffer reprisals, as an indirect way of attacking you.

If you're reprimanded, put on probation or targeted for dismissal, it is tempting to lie low due to acute embarrassment and humiliation. But by far the most effective response is to expose the attack. This means obtaining good documentation. Make sure to save the email that comes with a threat.

Going public to oppose attacks on free speech may mean sending an email to a group of supporters, putting up a website or seeking media coverage. Going public about reprisals has the advantage of increasing visibility about the matter you spoke out about.

A standard method of attack is denigration. You may be savaged under parliamentary privilege, but more likely just be the subject of rumours. Derogatory claims may be made about your scholarship, your honesty, your personal relationships, your motives or your sanity.

You may have evidence to counter these allegations, for example publication lists or staff evaluations. If you have allies, they may be willing to vouch for your good character and contributions. It's best to respond with dignity.

Almost always, an attack will be said to be something else. Your paper is rejected because of methodological flaws. You've lost your job

because of a restructure. These explanations may be sincere and sometimes they are correct.

Your task is to give an alternative explanation, namely that you've been treated unfairly. The double-standard test is useful. Maybe you've been denied leave or tenure even though many others with poorer performance have been granted it.

The instinctive response of many people under attack is to seek justice through official channels, such as grievance procedures, the ombudsman or the court. This is usually unwise.

I've heard countless stories of whistleblowers, including many academics, who have been disappointed by official channels. Pioneering research by William De Maria, an academic at the University of Queensland, backs up this impression: whistleblowers reported being helped in fewer than one in 10 approaches to agencies.

The problem is that official channels are stacked against the employee. They are interminably slow. They are procedural and seldom provide moral justice. They eat up vast amounts of time and energy, making it exceedingly difficult to maintain scholarly activities. The employer has much more money and staying power, and less to lose. Most important, official channels take the issue out of the public eye.

The judgment of experienced whistleblower advisers is that Australia's whistleblower laws are largely useless. It is far more effective to mobilise support.

Tenured academics are remarkably privileged. Though our jobs are not perfectly secure, we have far more freedom to speak out in the public interest than employees in government and industry.

The biggest risk to free speech by academics is not reprisals but self-censorship. The best antidote is for more people to speak out.

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