

Whistleblowing experiences: can we *really* do anything?

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Abstract Academic institutions, corporations and government departments in the west commonly espouse guidelines for practising ethical behaviour for the benefit of students, clients and citizens. However, individuals who report on wrongdoing often suffer damaging reprisals, thereby thwarting the ostensible goal of lofty guidelines.

Key Ideas

- Although higher education institutions have anti-corruption policies, there are major discrepancies between policy and practice.
- Those who speak out against unethical practices often suffer for their efforts.

Discussion Question 1 Does the law give institutions a way to say “we support” and “we comply” without addressing fundamental problems?

Discussion Question 2 What should an ethical person do when they attempt to highlight a problem to a superior or outside authority and are met with silence or cover-up, tantamount to tacit support for unethical practices?

In western countries, many academic institutions, corporate organisations and government departments set up guidelines aimed at promoting transparent ethical behaviour for the benefit of students, clients and citizens — but not everyone follows these guidelines. I mention a few familiar experiences of unethical behaviour to indicate the types of unethical behaviour prevalent in higher education. My concern is not with unethical behaviour per se, but rather about decision-making affecting individuals who report on such behaviour and the consequences of their actions for themselves, families and the workplace.

Example 1. A conscientious junior academic gives a failing grade to an international student. A senior academic does not want to deal with the administrative hassle associated with a fail and therefore changes the mark to a pass.

Example 2. A well-respected high-ranking academic, nearing the end of her career, asks one of her PhD students to write a journal article. The student does nearly all the work, with the supervisor only suggesting a few minor editorial changes. Even so, the supervisor insists on being first author, feeling that her seniority is the key issue, not the amount of work she contributed.

Example 3. In a faculty, every single male academic was appointed at a higher level than more highly qualified women. However, in a different faculty, female academics were given more time for research and fewer teaching responsibilities than their male colleagues.

The state of play

Universities are in the business of education; most professionals gain their qualifications at universities. Although Grossi (2004) suggests that whistleblowing is “not a desirable business practice,” conscientious employees may perceive it as the only ethical choice. For example, when academics have to teach increasingly larger classes without adequate resources, severely impacting on the quality of education, their options are stark: persevere with an increasingly compromised situation; leave and let the problems fester; or speak out to expose the problems.

On 27 July 2009, the Australian Broadcasting Corporation’s current affairs investigation programme *Four Corners* focused on unethical practices by private education institutions that enrol students, taking substantial fees from them, but then do not provide adequate resources and education. Many Australian universities design courses to attract full-fee paying students with the *promise* of a quality educational experience. However, many of these courses actually give a sub-standard education, sometimes due to management’s reluctance to provide adequate resources, sometimes due to a misjudgement about what is needed for the students, sometimes by the hasty establishment of the courses with insufficient human resources to provide quality, and sometimes by simple neglect, especially when fee-paying returns are not as great as anticipated. Many students attend these classes for visa purposes, family status, and improved opportunities in their home countries, but, because their communication abilities are poor, they have little hope of serious employment in their area of study in Australia. Birrell (2006) revealed that most of these students had to take menial jobs because they could not communicate well with clients. This raises questions about universities accepting full-fee-paying students who are not adequately equipped to deal with the extensive workloads required by their courses. Academics teaching these courses are quite aware that the time they spend on teaching is not valued as highly as the time they spend on research; they know that a disturbingly high proportion of these students is doomed to failure.

Whatever the pressures on them, educators have a responsibility to prepare students for professional lives and to introduce them into an ethical environment. In some professions, such as in the field of health, mismanagement, incompetence or unethical behaviour can result in patients dying. Because lives are at stake, the importance of acting against unethical practices — including by whistleblowing — is more obviously vital. High-quality medical care requires a large degree of trust between patient and doctor. As this trust underpins the status of doctors, it is difficult — and sometimes seemingly impossible — to criticise decisions made by medical professionals. Grossi (2004) suggests that the system needs auditing so that whistleblowing is unnecessary: an auditing process can encourage a “healthy ethical climate” that provides a way to begin to think about how to promote this sort of system, which in turn can bring a realisation of how resistant organisations can be to change.

Motivations of the whistleblower

1. Cultural

A person who speaks out about misconduct needs to consider the implications of their action. In spite of their making an ethical decision to promote transparency, whistleblowers are routinely pilloried. In Australia, the concept of mateship can be interpreted as so central to one's being that one mate must support the other in any situation, legal or illegal. The playing out of this notion in the workplace can be observed in the acceptance of unethical conduct because employees are reluctant to divulge a co-worker's wrongdoing, even major crimes. A study by Zhuang, Thomas and Miller (2005) suggests that in some cultures, such as China, it is easier to report on unethical activities by colleagues because allegiance is given to superiors rather than co-workers. The media are happy to expose unethical behaviour when it fits conventional news values (prominence, conflict, personalities, etc.); sometimes this comes across as sensationalism to increase audiences.

2. Individual

A person's moral beliefs may motivate them to bring misconduct or other unethical practices to the attention of a relevant authority. Taking the situation into one's own hands and seeking redress outside the organisation should not be done lightly.

Costs to the whistleblower

Many whistleblowers pay a huge price for their exposés. Their careers are often severely damaged, for example by promotion blockage, reprimands, demotion, dismissal, difficulty in gaining a new position, suspicion and shunning by peers, divorce, attempted suicide and bankruptcy. In fact, Wood's (2002, p. 68) study of 233 US whistleblowers provides statistics showing how they have suffered in specific ways due to reprisals for making their disclosures. The emotional impact of reprisals can cause self-doubt concerning whether their course of action was worth the loss of self-esteem, confidence, and career. Families of whistleblowers are also impacted: they have to deal with the pressure of living with a person suffering from depression, irritability and an obsession with a chosen course of action and its consequences.

Some positive moves

Many large organisations have policies concerning whistleblowing. Although many Australian universities have such policies, do academics feel they are adequately supported when they report unethical activities in the university? Verschoor (2005) notes that in the US, where ostensibly the law protects whistleblowers, they seldom receive any compensation for the enormous financial and emotional cost of revealing fraudulent practices.

Conclusion

Organisational systems are not doing their job in protecting people who speak out in the interests of the organisation or the public. The supposed guardians of the public interest, in other words watchdog agencies, themselves need to be scrutinised and challenged. In the education sphere, there are problems galore but few of those who know about them feel confident and safe to speak out. In this situation, how can educational integrity possibly be maintained?

References

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