

Ten tips for spilling the beans

Brian Martin

You discover some corruption at work and want to do something about it. So you report it to your boss. Whoops. Your boss was in on it, or tolerated it. You've become a whistleblower, and the reprisals start coming: the cold shoulder, rumours that you're mentally ill, unwelcome assignments, petty harassment. You might even lose your job just because you tried to do the right thing. Whistleblowers are treated like traitors, and suffer.

So what about leaking? You just send some documents to the media and no one knows you did it. Think again. It's not so easy. To expose the corruption while avoiding the dire fate of most whistleblowers, follow the rules.

#10. Keep your mouth shut!

As a would-be leaker, you might worry your boss will discover your identity by hacking into your computer or tapping your phone. Actually, the biggest risk is your own mouth. It's hard to keep a secret, and being a leaker is a *really* big secret.



Chelsea Manning found out the hard way. Manning, back when she was Bradley, had pulled off one of the biggest leaks in history, including the collateral murder video, Afghan and Iraqi war logs, and US diplomatic cables. She might never have been discovered, but couldn't resist telling a complete stranger, hacker Adrian Lamo, who told the feds. Manning copped 35 years in prison, all for being a blabbermouth.

So don't tell anyone—not on email, not on Facebook, not on the phone, not on secure chat. And be wary of that stranger at the bar buying you drinks.

#9. Serve the public interest.

You're exposing corruption, and that's the most important thing. Your mo-

tives shouldn't really matter, should they? Actually they do, indeed quite a lot.

Maybe you hate the boss, so you'll get even. Or you hate the company for treating the workers like shit. You can leak for revenge, but it's far better to leak for a noble cause. Why? Because other workers and members of the public will appreciate your efforts.



Go ahead and tie up the boss, but not if you're a leaker

Of course not everyone will appreciate it—that's why you need to leak, to avoid those who want things covered up. And there's plenty that's covered up: paedophilia in the churches, police abuse of suspects, financial fraud, special favours for friends, dumping hazardous substances, cheating people out of their homes, you name it. Exposing these crimes and abuses is a public service.

Think of famous whistleblowers. Think of Daniel Ellsberg, who leaked the Pentagon papers showing the sordid reality of US policy during the Vietnam war. Think of Deep Throat (Mark Felt), who revealed the crimes of Richard Nixon. Think of Coleen Rowley, who spoke out about shortcomings in the FBI handling of information prior to the 9/11 attacks.

If your leaks are seen by lots of people as worthwhile, you can think better of yourself and, if you're ever found out, you'll have more supporters.

#8. Collect plenty of material.

Many whistleblowers think that when they have evidence that's good enough, they can speak out. But enough evidence isn't good enough—you need lots more! Decide how much material you think will provide a convincing case, and then multiply by 10. Yes, you need more than you can imagine.

Suppose you hear the boss saying your team will fiddle the books. 20 others heard the same thing. When a journalist calls to ask about it, guess what? The boss and all 20 deny it happened. Or the boss says it was just a joke.



Perpetrators will lie, stonewall, and provide excuse after excuse. You need lots of documents—reports, emails, recordings—to show what they are doing despite their best efforts to avoid accountability.

#7. Take your time and choose your time.

The corruption is happening now and you want to stop it, so you urgently leak information about it. Big mistake.



The reality is that most corruption, abuses, and dangers to the public are ongoing. Maybe you just found out about them, but that doesn't mean you must act immediately.

You need to take time to make sure about what's happening and to collect plenty of material. And you need to wait until it's the best time to have an impact.

One of the great advantages of leaking is that you can stay in the job and continue to leak, over a period of weeks, months, or years. So take your time.

Waiting..



#6. Don't leave traces.

You're planning to leak, so you prepare carefully, thinking through all the steps you need to take. So far, so good, but it's not enough.

What you really need to do is think like your boss or a PI who's trying to track down the leaker. What will they do? Figure this out and prepare for it.

Simple mistakes are the downfall for leakers, for example leaving pages in the photocopier or private emails open on your screen. The basic idea is to leave no evidence of your activity on any device that your employer or investigators can easily inspect. How careful you need to be depends on how seriously they want to find the leaker.

You send a Word document to a journalist. Did you check "properties" to make sure it doesn't contain your name or location?

You're wise enough to avoid using your office computer, because the IT staff can check through it, and through all your messages. But you used your home computer. What happens if your account is hacked or—shock, horror—your computer is stolen? If you really need to be careful, you buy a separate

device like a tablet (using cash, not a credit card) not connected to the Internet, and do all your writing on it. Then you go to a cybercafé or public library far from your home, sign up with a new Yahoo account under a pseudonym, upload the file from your device, send it to recipients, close your new email account, and wipe, destroy, and discard your separate device. If you go to a cybercafé, pay in cash—and watch out for those security cameras.

It sounds like a lot of trouble, and it is. But it's a lot less trouble than getting caught.



Don't leave traces.

#5. Stick with what you're good at.

You might imagine that the most sophisticated methods of protection are the best. If you're experienced with encryption and anonymous remailers, then go ahead and use them. Otherwise, this is not the time for trying something new. It's better to use methods you feel comfortable with.

You can make telephone calls from a public phone (do they still exist?). Remember that investigators might be able to obtain the numbers of phones used to call a journalist. Julian Assange recently advised journalists to consider sending letters through the post.

Then there's the old-fashioned method of meeting face-to-face, with some noise in the background. It's still one of the best.



Use a disguise only if necessary.

#4. Choose your recipients carefully.

Get the message out, right? Go right to the top current affairs program—surely they will be interested.

Actually, it's not that easy. You might think your issue is breaking news, but whistleblowers often discover that journalists and editors have other priorities.

Journalists are promising recipients: carefully consider their track record and impact. There are other possibilities too: an action group (an environmental group, a consumer group: whatever's relevant to your leak), WikiLeaks or another online site, or directly to the public through your own website (set up surreptitiously).



Probably the wrong leak recipient

Edward Snowden is the world's most famous leaker, and for good reason. He knew what he was doing, and he did it extremely well. Snowden decided to leak to a journalist who would tell his story effectively. He didn't go to US newspapers like the *New York Times* or the *Washington Post* because he knew they were too timid in challenging the government. So he chose the British *Guardian*, and specifically the writer Glenn Greenwald, who had a track record exposing US abuses of power.

Snowden contacted Greenwald anonymously. Greenwald was interested but too busy to make the connection, even with the private tutorial Snowden designed. So Snowden approached Laura Poitras, a dissident in her own right and a friend of Greenwald's. Finally they were connected, and met in Hong Kong.

This whole process took quite a few months. Snowden made the right

choice and was both patient and persistent.

#3. Be prepared for a witch-hunt.

Leak your hot material and wait for it to have an impact. It sounds like your job is over, but actually the toughest part is about to begin.

If your leak generates some attention through the mass or social media, expect your employers to mount a search for the leaker. They're after *you!* They might search emails, devices, people's backgrounds, trips, and much else. They will check everyone with access to documents or to confidential information. They will suspect anyone with a grudge.



Angry mob looking for a leaker

If you've been careful until now, you're pretty safe. Do you know why there are so few famous leakers? It's because most of them are never caught. By comparison, there are hundreds of famous whistleblowers. Think of nuclear industry worker Karen Silkwood (played by Meryl Streep in, you guessed it, *Silkwood*) and tobacco company executive Jeffrey Wigand (played by Russell Crowe in *The Insider*). Other whistleblowers, not so famous (no Hollywood movies), have written books about their experiences, for example pharmaceutical company executive Peter Rost (*The Whistleblower: Confessions of a Healthcare Hitman*) and FBI translator Sibel Edmonds (*Classified Woman*).

Yes, whistleblowers are done over time and time again. They foolishly reported their concerns to bosses and paid the price. They trusted the system to provide justice and the system crushed them.

Witch-hunts for leakers are designed to send a message to workers not to say anything. By following the rules, you can be one of the ones who isn't caught.

Politicians and senior bureaucrats leak all the time for political and personal gain. Don't be fooled. Leaking by those at the top is standard practice and rarely penalised. Different rules apply for those lower on the totem pole.



#2. Behave naturally.

Your leak has had an impact. There's going to be an investigation into the corruption, and your boss is blowing a fuse. Time to celebrate! (Remember, keep it private.)

But with all the excitement, you now face a peculiar challenge: appearing natural. You're called in for an interview about the leak. Or your workmates casually bring it up in conversation. You need to behave just like you always do. However, being normal (normal for you that is: maybe you crack jokes about everything) is not always easy. You have a big secret, but have to pretend you know nothing about it.

Rest easy. Most people are pretty good at lying, and most people are not very good at detecting lies. So lie away, and don't feel bad. It's for a good cause.



Lie with confidence: no one will nose.

Remember also that some co-workers themselves might be afraid. They might not be leakers, but they might have things to hide.

If you are really good, you'll be seen as a trusted employee. You might even be put in charge of finding the leaker!

#1. If caught, go public.

Horrors—they're onto you. You made a mistake: you told someone, or your recipient did. Or you realise that they're going to find you before long. What to do? Your immediate instinct is to bunker down, being as private and inconspicuous as possible.

Actually, though, if your leak is for a good cause (remember rule #9), your best option is to go public. Yes, it's counter-intuitive; most whistleblowers are reluctant to go to the media. But you'll obtain far more support and sympathy from members of the public than from your employer.



Snowden leaked his material, but knew he would be tracked down. So he revealed his identity. Actually, Greenwald had to convince him to hold off for a few days.

As soon as your identity is known, the focus will be on you, not on what you're speaking out about. That's one reason leaking is more effective: the focus is on the issue, not the whistleblower.

If you really planned ahead, you already have a new job with a sympathetic employer, and you don't really care if you're identified. But still, it might be more fun to remain anonymous. Keep them guessing. You never know when you might want to leak again. It might even be addictive.

Brian Martin is editor of *The Whistle*.