One of the major challenges in business ethics today is creating a safe environment where employees can raise concerns about possible misconduct and wrongdoing. Despite the proliferation of helplines and ethics offices, creating a safe environment where employees can raise concerns about possible misconduct without experiencing retaliation is still one of the least well-developed elements of most business ethics programs.

I wrote those words back in 2006, and more than a decade later, they still hold true today. All too often, I see companies launch “speak up” programs with policies, slick communications and even employee training, thinking these steps will quickly encourage employees to raise concerns. It won’t—in fact it’s probably counterproductive. Creating a true speak up culture is hard work, and few easy answers exist.

Speaking Up Is More than Misconduct Reports

If a company wants employees to speak up about misconduct, it will need more open communications generally. In a closed communications culture, where no one is comfortable raising bad news or debating business strategies, employees simply won’t feel comfortable speaking up when the stakes are high, such as with possible misconduct. Fortunately, this challenge presents an opportunity. Creating a true speak up environment brings a host of business advantages, such as spurring innovation, creativity, and employee engagement. Further, in
an open communications environment, employees can speak up early and often, which deters misconduct in the first place.

A NASA study of jet transport accidents and incidents over a twenty-year period found that deficient interpersonal communications were a causal factor in approximately 80% of all accidents. The study found that pilot error was far more likely to reflect failures in team communication and coordination than deficiencies in technical proficiency.[2]

**Why Speaking Up is So Difficult**

Numerous societal impediments make speaking up difficult across the world. Common factors include:

1. **Cultural Entrenchment** – Think of English language words commonly used for someone who reports misconduct: snitch, fink, nark and tattletale, to name a few. What about positive words? “Whistleblower” is the least pejorative, but few employees aspire to become one! And it’s not just English. This phenomenon is found in virtually every major world language.

2. **Conformity Bias** – Seminal research conducted by Solomon Asch[3] in the 1950s shows that at least 77% of people will sometimes knowingly give a response they know is wrong to “go along with the group.”

3. **The Bystander Effect** – This phenomenon, studied in depth by Darley and Latané in the 1960s, found that the greater the number of individuals who know about a problem, the less likely any one person is to address it, a phenomenon known as diffusion of responsibility. The conduct then becomes “normalized” or just “the way we do business here.”[4]

4. **Respect for Hierarchy** – Hierarchy exists in all cultures, making it difficult for lower ranks to challenge those in authority. Stanley Milgram’s research on obedience to authority[5] is one demonstration of this phenomenon. In some countries, this is a cornerstone of their cultural values; questioning or reporting the misconduct of a higher rank would be unthinkable.

5. “**Shoot the Messenger**” – The concept of punishing those who bring bad news is a common refrain in organizational life. It is such a universal condition that leading psychologists, including Sigmund Freud and Carl
Jung, have studied it.

These inhibiting factors influence every employee before they even join an organization. They are already at a speak up deficit when they walk through our doors. Yet, too often, most organizations’ cultures further impede an employee’s willingness to speak up. These organizational factors include:

1. **Fear of retaliation** – This is typically the top-ranked reason why employees don’t speak up within business organizations. Perceptions of retaliation are not just limited to loss of job or reduced pay; rather it is often more “informal” retaliation that employees fear, such as being ostracized or being excluded from the inner circle, for example.

2. **Belief that nothing will happen** – If employees perceive that their concerns are not heard or addressed, they quickly determine that speaking up is not valued or worth the effort.

3. **Degree of hierarchy** – Hierarchy not only exists in all societies, it also factors into every organization. An extremely hierarchical organization further exacerbates the difficulty of speaking up.

4. **A culture of no “bad news”** – Often, bad news becomes unacceptable within an organization. Pressure exists to either explain it away or make it disappear.

5. **Incentives not aligned with speaking up** – Employees who speak up can be seen as troublesome—the “squeaky wheel.” They may receive little to no recognition or reward.

6. **Leaders/managers lack skills to promote speak up** – One important research study indicates that 82% of employees first approach their manager with a concern.[6] Yet, managers often don’t know how to listen to nor follow up on employee concerns. Many simply lack the skills to promote an open communication environment.

**Do You Have a Speak Up Culture?**

**Signs of a Speak Up Culture:**

- Employees feel their opinions are valued, even if not ultimately acted on.
Employees are comfortable asking questions.
The company responds to, and sometimes adopts, employee suggestions.
Employees feel a responsibility to raise issues.
Managers welcome information, even bad news.
Presentations are lively discussions with dissent and debate.
Employees recognize that speaking up is just part of problem solving.
Employees are comfortable constructively disagreeing with senior leaders.
Employees and managers can “agree to disagree”.
Employees may speak to senior leaders without their manager’s prior approval.
There are no small group “pre–meetings” or “post–meetings”—everything is said in the actual meeting itself.
Employees do not fear retaliation for speaking up.

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