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### Speaking up is an emotional process

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What does it feel like to raise a concern, or call the Speak Up line (also called a helpline or hotline), or be a witness in an investigation of misconduct in the workplace?

Speaking up is an emotional process. For corporate procedures to be effective, this needs to be acknowledged. In whatever country you operate, the law is imperfect and only goes so far to encourage and protect those who speak up, so it is up to ethics and compliance professionals to understand and empathize with the emotional complexities faced by someone who raises concerns, even within a supportive environment.

### The fear of reporting

I have spoken up at work, raising a concern about a bullying senior manager. My colleagues were too afraid to—fearful of the consequences and painfully aware that it had been done before, with seemingly no action taken. Instead, they warned against it. “If you report it, your life will be hell” was the message. Those fears are all too real for the 43% of employees who have witnessed misconduct but didn’t raise their concerns, according to the Institute of Business Ethics (IBE) Ethics at Work survey of employees.<sup>[1]</sup> According to the IBE’s survey, more than 27% of European employees fear that speaking up would jeopardize their jobs, 26% didn’t believe that any corrective action would be taken, and 26% worried that speaking up would alienate them from colleagues.

As the manager’s bullying behavior escalated, people left or were signed off sick, but still no one would speak up. No one wanted to be “the one.” They were scared of the potential retaliation, despite our organization having a non-retaliation policy. Calling the Speak Up line felt intimidating and serious, but when I eventually did, I felt an enormous sense of relief. My expectations were considerable, but I had no one to share them with. At first I felt exhilarated; it was empowering to take action. But as the days went past with nothing more than the original acknowledgement of my call, paranoia began to set in. Once an investigation was underway, although I was well supported by the senior leader who was managing the case, I felt isolated and alone within my team. Rumors began to fly about the manager being reported, and my colleagues speculated about who had made the report and what the outcome would be.

### The value of speaking up

Enlightened companies are seeing the value in encouraging employees to raise concerns early, before they become a bigger problem. The IBE has published a Good Practice Guide,<sup>[2]</sup> which showcases some of the strategies and processes that companies can put in place to help make their Speak Up/whistleblowing procedures

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effective.

This can begin with how speaking up is portrayed to employees. The terms “whistleblowing” and “Speak Up” are often used interchangeably and can cover disclosure of a wide range of legal and ethical issues. The term whistleblowing originates from when a pit whistle was blown at times of an accident in a mine and is analogous with a referee blowing the whistle because of a foul in a football match. In recent years, the connotation of whistleblowing has come to mean disclosing concerns outside an organization, usually by informing the media or a regulator. In society, we have an uncomfortable relationship with whistleblowers; in the media they can be branded as disloyal, as troublemakers, as snitches, and as tell-tales.

The IBE differentiates between whistleblowing and speaking up. Blowing the whistle externally may be considered a last resort, occurring when concerns have not been listened to or acted upon internally. Speaking up implies raising a concern internally so that it can be remedied, hopefully before it becomes a bigger problem. At the first incidence, that would mean feeling able to have a conversation with a manager to raise a concern or challenge something.

The term Speak Up has more positive and constructive connotations for organizations wishing to encourage employees to raise concerns. This change of language can mark the beginning of fostering an open culture, and there are numerous examples of companies seeing greater engagement by simply changing the name of their procedure and helpline from whistleblowing to something more positive.

One example is Aviva.<sup>[3]</sup> The company wanted to change perception of their whistleblowing procedure; they wanted staff to feel that not only was it safe to call, but it was the right thing to do. Using insights from behavioral economics, the first change they made was to simply change the name from Right Call to Speak Up. They then removed negative wording (e.g., fear, detriment, sanction, reprisals) to create new educational posters and leaflets.

## **The importance of a proper procedure**

Speaking up takes courage, so the user experience of hotlines is important in the same way as any helpline or customer service line. An example is Rio Tinto, who, in thinking about the psychology behind speaking up and the experience of raising a concern, rebranded their Speak Up line “Talk to Peggy.”<sup>[4]</sup> Peggy is a real person in the Ethics and Integrity group, who offers those who report a friendly human face to encourage the sharing of issues. This focus on the psychology of speaking up also changed the way calls were managed. Although the calls still went to a call centre, call handlers changed from a script to more active listening using techniques employed by the Samaritans (the suicide prevention helpline) in a more personalised response than previously.

A Speak Up procedure provides a mechanism for employees to raise concerns about anything they find unsafe, unethical, or unlawful. If effective, it can only be of benefit for an organization. As well as engendering an open and problem-solving culture, it provides an early warning system, where the company can be alerted to issues that can be dealt with before they become crises, whether that’s behavioral, fraudulent, threatening to health and safety, or reputational. It may be uncomfortable information to hear, but it is information that the organization needs to know.

## **Acknowledge the emotional journey**

Making a call is one part of the emotional journey for the person who speaks up. From experience, I know how vulnerable those who make the effort to raise a concern feel—the conflicting emotions, the confusion they experience about a situation, and the uncertainty of using a process they are unfamiliar with.

In her book *Wilful Blindness*, Margaret Heffernan describes those who speak up thus: “[Whistleblowers] are not cynics, but almost always start as optimists, not non-conformists but true believers. They are not, typically, disgruntled or disappointed; they are not innately rebels but are compelled to speak out when they see organizations or people that they love taking the wrong course.”<sup>[5]</sup>

Speaking up is an emotional process, and it doesn’t just end when the person raises the concern. From noticing a problem and having a conversation, through calling a helpline or being part of an investigation, the person who speaks up may experience different emotions, both positive and negative. Emotions such as confusion, guilt, paranoia, fear, elation, or pride are mostly experienced in isolation. If an investigation is begun as a result, the person who spoke up can feel sidelined and in the dark, fearing that nothing is happening, yet perhaps, still working in the environment where the issue occurred. This creates another risk in the process— that of believing that no action is being taken, and the concern must be taken outside the organization and the whistle blown. The company may also lose a loyal and committed employee.

For speaking up to become part of business as usual, it is crucial that we recognize the need to support those who do.

<sup>1</sup> Guendalina Dondé, *Ethics at Work: 2018 Survey of Employees Europe*. Institute of Business Ethics.

<https://bit.ly/2udiowF>

<sup>2</sup> Katherine Bradshaw, *Good Practice Guide: Encouraging a Speak Up Culture*, Institute of Business Ethics, 2017.

<https://bit.ly/2I6qLCa>

<sup>3</sup> IBE Research Hub Blog, “How are Aviva encouraging a speak up culture?” July 7, 2018. <https://bit.ly/2E7mbiZ>

<sup>4</sup> Rio Tinto helpline Talk to Peggy. <https://bit.ly/2GGFMZ1>

<sup>5</sup> Margaret Heffernan, *Wilful Blindness*, 2011, Simon & Schuster, Ltd.

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