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Weaponizing whistleblowing

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Whistleblower services are in use at most larger organizations today. Most allow the reporter to remain anonymous. This is clearly a requirement to protect the reporters in certain cases; however, it also provides the cover to make false or damaging claims that can create a great deal of damage, cost, and disruption for the organizations (and people). The cover of anonymity has allowed crafty individuals to weaponize a process that was put in place to provide a method for reporting legitimate concerns.

Every company I have been part of has had locations or individuals that have mastered the use of the whistleblower service to promote their own agenda. This is often overlooked by companies and may result in damage to or loss of some very good people. So why does this happen?

Cultural issues may need to be addressed, but there are other contributors, such as over-awareness of the whistleblower system without appropriate instruction on when and how it is to be used. Employees may also observe certain events and make false assumptions (e.g., "Jane got transferred to a different location because she filed a whistleblower complaint about the supervisor," or, "Joe got fired, because he had two people file whistleblower complaints against him."). It may be that certain outcomes have nothing to do with whistleblower calls, but the *perception* is that the calls directly led to the outcomes. These perceptions may now encourage misuse of the whistleblower service throughout the ranks.

Examples of weaponizing the hotline

Below are some common examples of how a hotline can be misused.

Example 1: Response to the SWAT team approach

We can observe that certain investigative formats may contribute to the weaponization. If a company uses the SWAT team approach (i.e., sending in a disruptive task force that appears to assume the person is guilty), then an employee may use this as a weapon to combat situations that the employee does not care for. "They didn't listen to my suggestion, so I'll teach them a lesson."

Example 2: Retaliation toward a new team member

Another common situation lending itself to this issue is when a longtime work group loses a member due to promotion, transfer, or departure from the company. A new worker is brought in to fill the absence. The new person obviously wants to make a good impression, so they work extremely hard to look good. In doing so, their productivity rate may exceed the existing workforce, thus making that group look bad. The new worker may also share different political or religious views or may be of a different race, sex, or age group than the rest of the

team. Whatever the reason, the existing team perceives a need to replace this person. One avenue they may use is to begin making false accusations and complaints about the new person via the whistleblower service or hotline under the cover of anonymity. If sufficient accusations are made, over time, management may be inclined to concede that this person was a bad hire and move or terminate the individual's employment.

Example 3: Projecting the blame onto someone else

Employee A is a poor performer, often making mistakes and slow to get required tasks accomplished. Knowing that they may be facing some unpleasant action from their immediate supervisor, employee A elects to file a preemptive whistleblower claim. The claim states that the supervisor is showing favoritism or bias, or perhaps employee A has not been given adequate training and direction by the supervisor.

In the next situation, employee B harasses, intimidates, or threatens another worker. Certain that the victim is going to report the situation, employee B reverses the situation and reports the intimidated worker for harassing them. This tactic is used to divert the issue to another person.

Similar to the above example, employee B may be engaged in theft or embezzlement. If it appears that management is becoming suspicious, an anonymous call could be made to divert suspicions to another person. At a minimum, it provides the perpetrator some time to better hide their actions.

Example 4: Not investigating the root cause of a high volume of calls

Senior management could become focused on the number of calls received at a branch or department, rather than the corrective actions and underlying causes. Is the goal of the system to diminish the number of calls or to improve undesirable situations? We do not want the sheer number of calls coming in to be used to punish people or branches. Instead, use it as a positive tool to make improvements as issues are raised. Perhaps a better measure would be to look at improvement by call type. For instance, location A had 49 harassment calls last year. Management performed a root cause analysis, and, after identifying the causes, they did extensive training, provided coaching, and fostered a positive, respectful work environment. Now the calls have decreased. Used in this manner, the whistleblower tool becomes a mechanism for improvement, not a weapon to be used against locations or individuals.

Example 5: Wanting to unveil the reporter

When the management team focuses on who filed the complaint instead of the investigation and corrective action (if needed), they are undermining the intent of the whistleblower reporting system. If the focus of the management team is to know the identity of the complainant, we must question that need. Is it to retaliate? Focus on the problem, not the reporter.

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