What Happens to Whistleblowers, and Why

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Whistleblowing is defined in the US *Whistleblower Protection Act 1989* as occurring when a present or former employee discloses information "which the employee reasonably believes evidences a violation of any law, rule, or regulation, or gross mismanagement, a gross waste of funds, an abuse of authority, or a substantial and specific danger to public health or safety." An alternative, shorter definition is "principled organisational dissent." This is a clear and convenient way of looking at the issue, and also points out parallels between whistleblowing and older versions of what is basically the same activity.

The whistleblower acts on *principle.* Conflict occurs within that individual between obedience, on principle, to the immediate authority (usually the employer), and what the whistleblower regards as a higher authority – concepts such as "truth," "justice," "the public interest," or God. The reaction that occurs is *organisational,* in that it arises from what is seen as a challenge to the organisation's authority from someone who, being within the organisation, is regarded as a traitor. The whistleblower *dissents* from the accepted culture, internal principles and practice of the organisation. (The culture and practice may not be, and usually are not, what is said to be the case – few, if any, organisations will admit to tolerating corruption, for example – and the whistleblower is almost always following the principles that society and the organisation *claim* are their norm.)

Major problems have occurred and continue to occur for us in society because of our failure to deal appropriately with the *principled organisational dissenter,* who is usually blowing the whistle on what we may call the *unprincipled organisational deviant.* An outstanding example of this in NSW [the Australian state of New South Wales] was the failure of the medical profession, the coronial system, the College of Psychiatrists, and the NSW Health Department to deal with the late Dr Harry Bailey [who used a dangerous treatment, called deep sleep therapy, on patients at Chelmsford Hospital in Sydney]. People who tried to blow the whistle on what was happening at Chelmsford were ignored and/or victimised, while his activities continued unchanged for some twenty years. Costs of this failure were:

- 26 deaths, and a number of people with permanent brain and other damage.
- Chelmsford Royal Commission, at a cost of $13 million (money not therefore available for useful services), and very damaging publicity (Lupton, 1993).
- Medical indemnity insurance viability threatened by damage suits, and skyrocketing premiums for doctors (costs which will be passed on to consumers).
- Reputation of and public trust in the medical profession eroded; cuts in health staffing, services, and benefits now correspondingly easier for the government to impose.

Other effects on the public of failure to nurture and encourage whistleblowing are widespread and serious. Examples are:

- The current economic recession, which can be seen as the victory of unprincipled deviance in the finance and banking industry over would-be and victimised whistleblowers who tried during the 1980s to alert us, and the industry, to what was going on.
- Environmental contamination, which is a major problem here, but, as is now becoming

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clear, was rampant behind the Iron Curtain, where of course whistleblowing was given even shorter shrift, and whistleblowers could expect to be sent to Siberia, or shot. Chernobyl is one well-known example of the inevitable results of ruthless suppression of any disagreement with current practices, no matter how unsafe. Some horrifying genetic and other medical consequences for the people of Kazakhstan of Soviet nuclear tests conducted nearby are only now being publicised, although they have been painfully obvious to locals for many years (Easterman, 1993).

- Disasters that could have been avoided, for example Challenger [space shuttle] – a whistleblower tried to prevent it from taking off, but did not go public until after it had crashed. NASA took no notice of the criticism while it remained internal, and tried to discredit him subsequently.
- Cuts in public services, such as health and transport, which are made necessary by having to fund corruption and mismanagement within those areas.

Effects on the whistleblower are just as serious. It should be noted that many people who are treated by the organisation as if they have blown the whistle (i.e., have gone outside the organisation, to some other authority, or to the media) have not in fact done so. They may have, for example, written a report in the course of their duties, the contents of which the employer doesn't like, or which is then leaked by someone else; or they may simply be known to be aware of the corruption/mismanagement, and to be unsympathetic to it. As one such person said, be hadn't blown the whistle at all – he was suspected of loitering with intent near a whistle!

The following is from a survey of some 233 whistleblowers in the US (McMillan, 1990).

- 90% lost their jobs or were demoted
- 27% faced lawsuits
- 25% got into difficulties with alcohol
- 17% lost their homes
- 15% were divorced
- 10% attempted suicide
- 8% went bankrupt.

A more detailed survey done in 1993 under the auspices of Whistleblowers Australia (WBA) obtained similar results. Thirty-five subjects had blown the whistle on corruption and/or danger to the public, in a period of less than two years to over twenty years ago. They came from a range of occupations – banking/finance, health, law enforcement, local government, transport, teaching and miscellaneous public service, state and federal. Their estimate of the cost of the corruption to the taxpayer was thousands of dollars (14%), hundreds of thousands (17%), 1–30 million (26%), and hundreds of millions (9%) – the banking/finance cases.

Danger to the public included disease/contamination, unsafe hospital equipment, unsafe aircraft, unsafe railways, licensing of incompetent drivers, child sexual abuse, arson/sabotage and unsafe working conditions. Other items also classified under danger to the public were wrongful eviction from homes, insider trading, and immigration rackets. On the same measures as the US study:

- 90% lost their jobs or were demoted
- 20% got into difficulties with alcohol
- 20% had a long-term relationship break up
- 20% were threatened with a defamation action
- 6% attempted suicide
- 9% went bankrupt

The question about loss of home was not specifically asked.

The organisation's response to the whistleblower is very powerful and follows a recognisable pattern. It is crushing in its intensity, as the organisation can use as many staff as it takes, for as long as it takes, to wear the lone whistleblower down. There is almost always some kind of disciplinary action, often on "unrelated" matters, up to and including dismissal. (The employer's ability to take action on allegedly unrelated matters is a major barrier to effective whistleblower protection legislation.) In the WBA study, 20% were dismissed and 14% were demoted; 14% were transferred (to another town, not just within the department); 43% were pressured to resign; and 9% had their position abolished.

There is often some kind of legal action, for example defamation suits, or use of the Official Se-

crets Act, if it applies. The main legal action in Australia seems to be threatened defamation action – this occurred in 20% of cases.

While the person remains in the job, informal tactics are used almost invariably. In the WBA study, these included:

- isolation – from the usual channels of information and consultation (49%); or maybe physical (23%), for example being put in a room with a desk and chair, no telephone, and not allowed to leave it without permission (or in one case, in a separate building with no one else in it)
- removal of normal work (43%)
- abuse and denigration, formal and informal, usually by supervisors, who may also encourage other employees to give the whistleblower a hard time (43%)
- minute scrutiny of timesheets and work records, inspections, adverse reports sought from previous employer (34%)
- demanding or impossible orders (26%)
- referral for psychiatric assessment/treatment (37%, plus an attempt to do so in another 9%)
- repeated threats of disciplinary action (20%)

Other items reported in the WBA survey, less frequently, were other types of harassment, assignment of menial duties, denial of benefits, denial of access to site, removal of files, death threats, fines, internal inquiries, falsification of records, and unrelated charges.

This victimisation usually continues until the whistleblower is dismissed, resigns or retires early. At the time of the WBA survey, only 10% of those who had been working for the organisation they blew the whistle on were still working in the same position. A common outcome was to resign or retire because of ill health related to the victimisation (29%), At the time of the study, only 29% were working full-time for any employer, 29% were unemployed, 6% were working part-time, 11% had retired and 6% were on the invalid pension.

The organisational response

The organisational response is orchestrated as well as powerful. In most cases it is also very fast. All the subjects in the WBA survey had started by making a complaint internally, through what they believed were the proper channels. In three cases (9%), the complaint did not go further than that. In thirty-two cases (91%), after the internal complaint failed, the subjects complained to some outside body, for example local parliamentarian, union, ombudsman. They went public, to the media, only after that too failed. Only 49% had ever been to the media. But in 83% of cases, the victimisation occurred immediately the first internal complaint was made. In some cases it had started before, for example when the whistleblower had refused a bribe. This is in sharp contrast to the usual view of whistleblowers – that they are publicity-seeking ratbags [disgusting people] who rush off to wash dirty linen in the media on very slight provocation (Parker, 1992).

The organisation's response may involve the whistleblower's trade union if other members on that site are actively involved in the original malpractice or in persecution of the whistleblower; or the hierarchy of the union may have connections with management who are corrupt, or have an interest in keeping the matter quiet. In the WBA survey, while 6% of subjects found their union "helpful," 17% found them "harmful," and 23% "neither helpful nor harmful" or "useless."

The organisation's response may also involve other potential supports of the whistleblower, including members of parliament; or their church, if that is the subject of the allegations, or if there is some other connection. If the organisation is, or includes, organised crime, potential supports may be too scared to become involved in any way, no matter how small.

I believe that such a response indicates the activity the whistleblower is complaining of is endemic/accepted within the organisation. I am gradually becoming convinced that the occurrence of a powerful response means that corruption includes top management. (This apparent correlation may in fact simply be a reflection of the pervasiveness of corruption in top management at the present time. It would be interesting to test it in a country where high-level corruption is not endemic – always supposing such a place exists!)

The organisational response to whistleblowing is not new. The traditional treatment of mutineers has always been similarly very savage, as a challenge to authority that can never be allowed, whatever the provocation.

Heretics received similar treatment in the days when the established church had more authority than it does now; the political dissenter under a totalitarian regime is now treated in similar fashion – in the former Soviet Union, this included the systematic misuse of psychiatry (very reminiscent of the misuse which Australian whistleblowers experienced), where dissent from government policy was the sole and sufficient symptom of a disease not recognised in other countries – "creeping schizophrenia" (Koryagin, 1989). On a smaller scale, but reflecting essentially the same process, the incest victim challenges the system of family authority, and unless specifically supported, is likely to experience the same destructive response.

The aims of the organisation's response are:

1) to isolate the whistleblower by removal from the accepted "in-group" (one of us) to "out-group" status, by representing the whistleblower as:
    - incompetent
    - disloyal
    - a ratbag
    - mentally unbalanced/ill
2) to frighten others who might otherwise support the whistleblower
3) to avoid examining or remedying the issue the whistleblower is complaining about.

This had largely been achieved in the cases in the WBA survey. The wrongdoing continued unchanged or increased in 71% of cases; the wrongdoers were promoted (26%) or had nothing happen to them (60%); minor disciplinary action against wrongdoers occurred in 14%, but there was only one case of any disciplinary action against a wrongdoer without others involved in the same activity being promoted. In contrast, the whistleblowers were left to struggle with massive financial loss – 40% had a reduction of 75% or more of their income, and 49% estimated their personal financial loss (including legal and medical costs, loss of income, superannuation etc.) in the $100,000 to $1 million range. At the time of the study, their physical and mental health was now poor, and their careers in ruins.

Their families suffered with them: thirty whistleblowers had a total of seventy-seven children between them. Of those, sixty (78%) were said to have been adversely affected – by divorce and forced separations; poverty and financial stress; disrupted education; anxiety; insecurity; stress; anger and loss of faith. In one case the family was unable to go out because of the risk (father having a contract on his life and being under police protection); other cases involved a death-threat letter addressed to a six-year-old by name; pets killed as reinforcement to a death threat; and public attacks on the parent's image.

Whistleblowers and statutory authorities

The WBA survey included a question on the response of authorities to whom the whistleblower appealed for help. These had generally been remarkably unhelpful. A total of fifty authorities were mentioned, covering several states and the federal jurisdiction. The Administrative Appeals Tribunal did best, with three "helpful" mentions, one "neither helpful nor harmful," and no "harmful." Industrial relations bodies were next, with two "helpful," two "neither," and two "harmful." Ombudsmen scored only one "helpful" (NSW), two "harmful," fourteen "neither," and one "useless." The Independent Commission Against Corruption scored one "harmful" and eight "neither." The Human Rights Commission and anti-discrimination bodies scored two "harmful" and four "neither." Police scored two "harmful" and five "neither." Local members of parliament scored one "helpful," two "harmful," and six "neither." The Merit Protection and Review Agency scored one "helpful," two "harmful" and two "neither." In total, there were only ten "helpful" mentions, compared with twenty-two "harmful" and fifty-two "neither helpful nor harmful."

Whistleblowers and workmates

One of the most distressing experiences for most whistleblowers is the lack of support, and sometimes active victimisation, from workmates. Particularly distressing are acts of betrayal by people who previously were close to them. There is usually

some support, but this is often covert. It is not uncommon for workmates to express support and approval if they are alone and unobserved, for example if they meet the whistleblower in a lift, but to walk past without acknowledgement if they meet in an open corridor. In the WBA survey, open or even secret support from most or some workmates occurred in less than half the cases; from few or none in over half. Ostracism, active victimisation and betrayal occurred to some degree in about three-quarters. Overall, it seems most workmates play it safe.

Whistleblowers and psychiatrists

Whistleblowers are often referred to a psychiatrist by the employer. The aim then is to make a finding sufficient to discredit the whistleblower, as having a personality disorder, a pre-existing psychiatric illness, or a neurotic reaction. All too often, the psychiatrist selected by the employer will cooperate in this, relying perhaps on uncorroborated information/allegations supplied by the employer without the whistleblower's knowledge or consent. If, as not uncommonly happens, the psychiatrist reports that there is no pre-existing problem, and the person's complaints of malpractice within the organisation should be taken at face value and properly investigated, the employer will usually insist on referral to another psychiatrist; and if that one's report is no more helpful, to another … until the desired report is achieved. One whistleblower was sent to a total of eight psychiatrists!

In the WBA survey, 40% of the men and 30% of the women had been forced by their employer to see a psychiatrist. They saw between one and six each (average three). 30% of them found the experience helpful or neutral; 70% found it unhelpful or distressing. In three more cases the employer tried to refer the whistleblowers to psychiatrists, but was successfully resisted.

Whistleblowers also often voluntarily present to psychiatrists, and/or their local doctor, with symptoms arising from the severe stress they are under. They commonly become extremely anxious, may have panic attacks, have trouble sleeping, lose confidence and self-esteem, become depressed and even suicidal, may attempt suicide, and often become obsessed with the issue. They may also present with alcohol and other drug problems, if they start using them to try to cope with the stress; or with problems in the marriage, caused by the stress. In the WBA survey, 83% of subjects experienced symptoms: those listed above plus feelings of guilt and unworthiness, nervous diarrhoea, breathing trouble, loss of appetite, loss of weight, high blood pressure, palpitations, hair loss, teeth grinding, nightmares, headaches, tiredness, weeping, tremor, urinary frequency, loss of interest in sex. They had an average of 5.3 symptoms each at the time they blew the whistle, and still had an average of 3.6 at the time of the survey, between one and twenty years later. 43% were on medication they had not been on before they blew the whistle – for depression, high blood pressure and stomach ulcers. Only 49% were originally drinkers; of those, plus two previous non-drinkers who started drinking to cope with the stress, 32% had developed a problem. (One had stopped drinking altogether because of this.) Six (17%) were smokers when they blew the whistle. All smokers had increased their consumption afterwards because of the stress; one had quit because of this.

Eighteen (51%) still thought about the whistleblowing and its aftermath every day, for one or more hours. This was spread equally among the different time categories, that is, it still applied even after twenty years.

Two subjects had attempted suicide, one of them twice; and seventeen (49%) had considered suicide, ten of them seriously.

False/malicious whistleblowing

When discussing the subject of whistleblowing, the possibility of false, malicious, petty or delusional whistleblowing has to be considered. In the current climate, only the last is at all likely to occur; but if/when effective protection legislation is in place, it is conceivable that people who suspect they are likely to be accused of some wrongdoing they have in fact committed, could get in first with an accusation against others, then claim the protection of the law. It is important to remember, though, even with a whistleblower who has been involved in criminal activity, that especially with corruption involving

organised crime, the evidence of such people is often all that is available. It is also often the best.

It is important not to get caught up in the process of minute inspection and analysis so typical of the whistleblowing situation, and described beautifully in evidence given to the Nagle Royal Commission into the prison system in NSW in 1976 by a psychologist, Len Evers, who had blown the whistle on bashings that occurred after a riot:

> *Well I suppose the main bone of contention [with a senior Corrective Services official] was whether I should give him the statement that I held at that point, and if I did give it to him, under what kinds of guarantees he could give me that the prisoners in question would not be discriminated against in any way; and the other thing, I suppose, was at that point I had become suspicious of the reason for the departmental interest – it seemed to me that they were not following the line that I expected them to take, that they were in fact examining me, and not the things I was trying to bring to their notice.* [emphasis added] (Nagle, 1976)

Despite what employers would like to believe about whistleblowers' personalities, they seemed in the WBA survey, at least on a rough assessment, to be unremarkable. On an adaptation of the Myers-Briggs scale, 60% were introverted and 40% extroverted, that is they are less extroverted than the general population, where these ratios are roughly reversed. On the remaining axes, there was a preponderance of the STP combination (sensing-thinking-perceiving), which at 46% was much higher than the approximately 12% found in the general population. This personality type is considered particularly suited to occupations like accountancy and quality control (Myers 1980) and it is not perhaps surprising to find it present so often in whistleblowers. It is, however, the antithesis of the employer's perception of the impulsive publicity-seeking ratbag.

Nor are whistleblowers remarkably religious. Twenty-one (60%) said they were Christians (no other religion was mentioned); fourteen (40%) had no formal belief. (In the 1992 census, 68% of Australians classified themselves as Christians.) Their motives, however, for blowing the whistle were predominantly ethical – duty, concern for others, justice, or to stop the wrongdoing. But even if they were in fact all publicity-seeking ratbags, criminals, or "difficult," examining their sanity, personality, motives and morals is always irrelevant. What matters is whether what they are saying is true.

Corruption of protection agencies

A very important issue is the corrupting process that is likely – possibly inevitably – to affect investigators and whistleblower protection agencies. It is almost universal experience that bodies which have been set up to redress injustice of this kind gradually become part of the authority system themselves, hence useless to the whistleblower. Most royal commissions [government-instigated formal inquiries] turn into whitewashes. Sometimes they were set up to do just this, but often were not; they become corrupted by close contact over a long period with the culture in question. The Fitzgerald Inquiry in Queensland was an honourable exception to this. I attended the inquiry one afternoon while Jack Herbert (the bagman [carrier of illegal takings]) was giving evidence, describing how the system had worked and giving an impression of harmless and sometimes humorous normality. It was a very seductive account, which was brought back to reality at fairly regular intervals by the Commissioner asking a question that firmly and politely reminded him and the court that be was a self-confessed crook, and what he was talking about so glibly and pleasantly was a serious crime.

Apart from the seductiveness and contagiousness of corruption, there is also the practical issue of career and personal advancement within the larger bureaucracy of which the protection agency is necessarily a part. A protection officer who makes life too difficult for other bureaucrats is unlikely to achieve advancement in any other department, and prospects for promotion if confined to their own agency will be very limited.

Obedience to authority

Apart from such personal and essentially selfish considerations, why do psychiatrists, workmates and protection agencies so often support the authority and not the whistleblower? Although in several states in Australia there is a legal obligation to re-

port a felony and "it is fundamental to our legal system that the executive has no power to authorize a breach of the law, and that it is no excuse for an offender to say that he acted under the orders of a superior officer" (Sir Harry Gibbs 1984), the basic problem, and paradox, is *that obedience to authority, a basic necessity for constructing and maintaining our society, becomes a powerfully destructive force when that authority is doing wrong.*

This issue was studied extensively after World War II, when it became clear that the Holocaust that killed six million Jews and others was organised not by abnormal sadists, but by very ordinary bureaucrats. An important series of studies was done by Stanley Milgram, at Yale, in the late 1960s (Milgram, 1974). This involved an experiment, ostensibly on "memory and learning," with a "teacher," chosen by rigged ballot, who was the real subject of the experiment, and a "learner," who was really an actor. The "teacher" was asked to administer a series of shocks of increasing intensity to the learner when the learner gave wrong answers.

Despite clear warnings on the switches, protests from the learner, and the possible illness/death of the "learner," two out of three subjects went to the maximum 450-volt shock. The subjects of this experiment experienced a great deal of stress in the situation. Some of the compliant ones would offer some covert resistance, giving a lower shock if the experimenter wasn't present, or giving the "learner" hints of the right answer; some, however, reduced their stress by blaming the "learner" for stupidity and slowness. Milgram and colleagues were horrified and distressed by the degree of compliance shown. He postulates that people in a situation where they are being told what to do by someone identified as an authority enter an "agentic state," where they put aside issues of individual responsibility and morality. This state is reinforced by:

- ideas of duty, loyalty and discipline
- becoming enmeshed in an incremental fashion
- being able to see oneself as just a cog in an administrative machine
- simple fear of social embarrassment.

It is decreased by:

- increased proximity to the victim (compliance was halved if the "learner" was seated next to the "teacher," who had to force his hand into contact with the electric plate; as opposed to the base situation where the "learner" was out of sight, but within earshot, in the next room)
- group support for disobedience
- lower prestige of the authority.

Milgram suggests that this issue is one that threatens the very survival of the human race; and indeed it seems a very fundamental and intrinsically insoluble paradox. This was expressed very succinctly to me once by a rationalist friend who ran an underground printing press from his home in the best rationalist tradition. He said he also did a bit of work for the anarchists, and would have liked to do more, because they had some very good ideas, but "they're not very well organised"!

Groupthink

A related issue is the general behaviour of groups. Apart from obedience to an identifiable authority, people in groups tend to conform to what others in the group do or say, even when the group view is glaringly wrong (Asch, 1951). A form of conformity particularly relevant to whistleblowing is the "groupthink" described by Janis (1972) when a cohesive group, often with a dynamic and influential leader, manages to insulate itself from the reality of a situation by ignoring important aspects of it, excluding any member who questions the validity of its decisions. The classic example was the invasion of the Bay of Pigs under President Kennedy, where he and his advisers took on a project that to outsiders seemed, and in the event was, politically and practically impossible, and very damaging.

It is clear that top management in many whistleblowing cases is in a state of groupthink. The typical whistleblower accumulates a mass of significant documentary evidence and has no difficulty convincing journalists and others outside the organisation of the truth of what they are saying. The bureaucracy, however, remains completely convinced that X is a troublemaker whom no one would listen to. And the government minister, even in the situation where the whistleblower is obviously in conflict with the minister's department, will continue in the

face of a succession of damaging allegations to rely on evidence from that department, without making any attempt to consult anyone else – and particularly not the whistleblower.

Bureaucracy is of itself, and by its nature, an integral part of the problem. This was well expressed in another royal commission (Slattery 1990) by a senior NSW Health Department bureaucrat who was asked to justify advice given to the Health Minister in response to a letter from the Attorney-General asking what was being done about the abuses going on at Chelmsford Hospital:

Q: Do you now say it is misleading?

A: I think with a deal of hindsight maybe it did not tell the full story.

Q: You did not think it was important in answering [the Attorney-General] to say, "In response to your letter of 17 October 1978 investigation has been initiated but practically nothing has been done for two years"?

A: Any bureaucrat who wrote that would not be left alone. It is unbelievable to suggest anyone would write such a letter.

Bureaucracy, unless active steps are taken to prevent it, will always be in a state of combined groupthink and obedience to authority. The flow of ideas and instructions is from the top down; and any conflicting or unpleasant information from the bottom is self-censored, as outlined above.

Advice to whistleblowers

So what should potential whistleblowers do, given the power, inflexibility and irrationality of the system they face? Advice from whistleblowers in the WBA survey (apart from 20% saying "don't") was along the lines of being prepared. Have everything documented, with tapes and videotapes if possible; learn the legal aspects before you start; trust very few people, particularly politicians; try to remain anonymous; get outside help; don't expose yourself to the employer, but go straight to an outside agency. Other things that became clear from the survey were that the outside agency would be unlikely to help, and might even be harmful; and while I would hesitate to advise people definitely at this stage on the basis of one relatively small survey, it may well be that in fact the best thing to do is what whistleblowers are so often unjustly accused of doing – go straight to the media, without trying the potentially extremely risky course of making the first complaint through the proper channels. It is very important for whistleblowers, when considering making a complaint, internal or external, to line up support for themselves before they start. The most reliable support will come from outside the organisation – support from within is likely to crumble once a typical employer reaction starts. A body such as Whistleblowers Australia is useful, not only for general support and advice, but also in some cases to take whistleblowers' information to the media or outside agencies, rather than them having to take the risk of doing it themselves. There are at least two important psychological considerations in having the matter raised externally to start with: first, that since one issue is the indignity of having imperfections in the organisation pointed out by a "traitor" within it, particularly since that person is usually in a relatively lowly position, it may in fact be easier for management to approach the matter realistically if the person who first raises it is an outsider; second, that even if it is fairly obvious who the informant is (as it often will be, no matter what precautions are taken), the appearance of an outsider right from the start removes the perception of the whistleblower as a lone eccentric who will be easily disposed of by a concerted attack. The more and sooner the very unequal power relationships can be seen to be altered in the whistleblowers' favour, the less unfair their treatment is likely to be.

A very important piece of advice for whistleblowers, which they ignore at their peril, is never to use an official, internal "anti-corruption" body for anything but the most trivial matter, and preferably not to risk using it even then. Whistleblowers Australia suffers from an inevitable bias in the information they get, in that satisfied whistleblowers are unlikely to contact them. It is possible that there are internal anti-corruption bodies that are genuine, but in our experience the problem pointed out by Bok, regarding dissent, also applies to lesser corruption:

> *If the abuse – the secret bombing of Cambodia, for instance, or corporate bribery, or conspiracy to restrict trade – is planned by those in charge,*

then the "open-door" policy turns out to be a trap for the dissenter (Bok 1981).

Internal anti-corruption bodies often seem to aim to trap and weed out actual and potential whistleblowers rather than do anything except produce glossy brochures on weeding out the corruption itself.

Another important piece of advice is that at all stages whistleblowers and their supporters have to be prepared for the long haul. It was clear from the survey that the damage done to the whistleblower, and particularly to the family, increases as time goes on. The children said not to have been damaged were all from cases that had been going less than four years. Even four years, of course, seems an incredible length of time to whistleblowers in the early stages – they assume it should be resolved in a few weeks or months. It won't be. The legal system, and statutory authorities, work on a time scale where three months to answer a letter is reasonable, and indeed rather fast. It is exceedingly difficult, even when both sides want a matter settled, to achieve it expeditiously. When one side does not want it settled, or indeed to get into open court, and that side has the power and money, it can be drawn out almost indefinitely, for as long as necessary to exhaust the whistleblower's emotional and financial resources. The industrial court system is less unwieldy, and is therefore the best option for whistleblowers, as long as they can get support from their union.

Advice to management

The basic question that has to be decided by management is one of ethics, and if top management is not corrupt, that question is relatively simple. It is not only unethical to support and conceal corruption, it is also bad for business; it is not only unethical to put employees (or indeed any fellow human being) through the prolonged and devastating torment whistleblowers suffer, it will also mean an unhappy, guilty, fearful and much less efficient and productive workforce – bad for business again. The difficulty, though, in implementing a Fitzgerald-like approach to encouraging whistleblowers and exposing and weeding out corruption, is that the small and "justified" lurks [rackets] that have become accepted practice in management are likely to be exposed too; and it is quite possible that, as in Queensland, once exposed, the stain will be seen to extend right to the top.

Corruption is like white-ant infestation – silent and unnoticed until part of the structure collapses; but once it is found somewhere in a building, it must be assumed to be everywhere until proved otherwise. Bosses who refuse to recognise this must, I believe, be assumed to be part of the problem, that is actively involved. They may in fact simply be naive, but more often, I believe, they are corrupt.

A related issue is the extreme difficulty that known whistleblowers usually have in getting another job in their field. If managers of similar organisations were committed to eliminating or preventing the type of practice the whistleblower complained of, then obviously there could be no better person to employ than one who has shown, in an extensive trial by ordeal, that he or she is not corruptible; is particular in attention to facts and to detail, and has the longer term interests of both the public and the organisation at heart, rather than opting for a quiet life in the short term. It seems, however, that in practice managers are not at all enthusiastic about exposing themselves and their organisation to such people. Again one has to ask whether this is simply a matter of authority figures sticking together no matter what, or being nervous of staff who may rock the boat; or whether it means that most managers have something to hide.

In the long term, there is an obvious need for more education and research into this area. On what is known now, it would seem that astute and honest chief executive officers (CEOs) would insist on all internal complaints coming directly to them in the first instance; would make it clear to subordinates that any victimisation of complainants will not be tolerated, and any complaints against complainants on "unrelated" matters· will be treated as victimisation until proved otherwise; and would follow up outcomes of complaints, including by personal interviews with the complainants. This assumes that the CEO is not corrupt, and is prepared to deal appropriately with complaints that may turn out to involve others in top management. It also assumes that

the CEO is willing to listen to criticism, and is open to input from people lower down the hierarchy.

But in the end, it comes back to ethics – in management and in the general workforce; an acceptance that corruption, financial or otherwise, is damaging both to the organisation and to the whole community; and that whistleblowers represent an important and valuable resource in helping to keep standards the way we would like them to be.

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