

# Keep staff sweet: how should a company deal with staff complaints?

**24 November 2020: Corporate ethics expert Lord Gold outlines steps companies can take to deal effectively with staff who have a complaint.**

In [my last article \(https://www.icaew.com/insights/viewpoints-on-the-news/2020/oct-2020/blowing-the-whistle-speak-up-if-you-dare\)](https://www.icaew.com/insights/viewpoints-on-the-news/2020/oct-2020/blowing-the-whistle-speak-up-if-you-dare), I talked about the challenge of employees speaking out if they spot wrongdoing. They will often fear doing so and make a calculation that it will harm their prospects. Business leaders need to be aware of this and design internal systems strong enough to encourage waverers to come forward.

There follow several essential steps which, if undertaken, can create an effective helpline and reporting system.

First, the helpline must be secured, so anonymity can be achieved. Understanding the risk of the complaint becoming known to the manager and finding a subtle way of investigating without blowing cover is key. Many organisations administer their helpline using independent specialist companies that receive and respond to calls and act as a barrier between employee and employer.

Second, employees must have confidence that any issue will be fully and quickly investigated and, if necessary, remedial action taken. If the investigation determines that someone has behaved badly, that person must be disciplined and employees told the facts, even if the individuals are not identified.

Keeping the complainant informed as the investigation continues is essential. Where the identity of the complainant is unknown, this can be done through the intermediary company providing the complainant with a means of remotely ascertaining what progress has been made. Companies should aim to complete investigations, from start to finish, within a finite time. A 60-day turnaround is regarded as good practice.

Too many employers are nervous about publicising, even on an anonymous basis, the fact that complaints have been made, investigated and action taken, even though this information invariably gives confidence to employees that they will be safe if they come forward. So, here's the next action: ensure there is good communication in the company, that everyone knows what is going on. If a call to the helpline results in the company taking action and making changes, employees will truly appreciate being told and support for management will improve.

Better communication about the existence of the helpline, through messages from management (especially senior management), posters and discussion at team meetings will help push the number of calls up.

The company should regularly review the nature of calls made to the helpline to identify whether any trends should alert management to concerns or problems. Again, keeping the workforce informed, identifying the trends and demonstrating that the company is listening and taking action, helps build confidence and support for management.

An easy way to know whether this campaign is working is regularly to review the number of calls made to the helpline. If the trend is up and continues, then that demonstrates that management is getting its message across. In all my dealings with different businesses, I have not come across anywhere the helpline has been overrun with calls. This may please management but rather than being a sign of a strong culture, can often indicate weakness.

Companies that get this right and improve the way employees can communicate concerns with management notice the benefit quickly as a step towards greater openness within their organisation. Employees truly appreciate the ability safely to come forward and raise issues, particularly if they can see that the company listens and acts. All this makes for a much happier working environment which can only be a good thing.

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- [Blowing the whistle: Speak up, if you dare \(https://www.icaew.com/insights/viewpoints-on-the-news/2020/oct-2020/blowing-the-whistle-speak-up-if-you-dare\)](https://www.icaew.com/insights/viewpoints-on-the-news/2020/oct-2020/blowing-the-whistle-speak-up-if-you-dare)
- [Corporate ethics: it's all about behaviours \(https://www.icaew.com/insights/viewpoints-on-the-news/2020/sep-2020/corporate-ethics-its-all-about-behaviours\)](https://www.icaew.com/insights/viewpoints-on-the-news/2020/sep-2020/corporate-ethics-its-all-about-behaviours)
- [Keep corporate standards close to home \(https://www.icaew.com/insights/viewpoints-on-the-news/2020/oct-2020/keep-corporate-standards-close-to-home\)](https://www.icaew.com/insights/viewpoints-on-the-news/2020/oct-2020/keep-corporate-standards-close-to-home)