

Blowing the whistle: Speak up, if you dare

29 October 2020: While creating a helpline for employees to raise issues without fear of retribution is a start, corporate ethics expert Lord Gold argues that unless employers take these concerns seriously it risks undermining confidence in management.

Many organisations tell me they don't need a dedicated helpline for employees to raise issues because employees won't hesitate to inform their manager or HR if they have any concerns.

CEOs of companies which do operate a helpline often proudly claim that all must be fine, as so few calls are made. Few stop to consider that a dearth of calls is a warning bell, not something to be proud of and certainly not an indication that employees have no issues of concern that they would wish to raise.

The creation of a helpline is designed to give employees an alternative channel through which they can safely raise issues without fear of some retribution. Of course, in the perfect company if an employee has a concern it should be raised with the manager or with HR but many fear that if an issue is raised in this way they will be punished. They see HR as being part of management who will deal with any issues raised in a formal way which could harm them.

Such helplines are to provide an alternative and safe way for employees to raise concerns. Assurance is usually given to employees that if they call the helpline and seek anonymity, they can have it and can raise their concern without fear of being found out.

Whilst, in theory, this does answer the problem, in practice, employees often fear that if they have a specific complaint that relates to them, there is a good chance that their identity will become known, whatever assurance of anonymity is given. How else, they may think, can their complaint be properly investigated if they are not identified?

A further (and major) factor that discourages employees from coming forward is a belief that the company will not listen, that they will not take the complaint seriously and no action will be taken.

So, employees often think, why risk retribution when the employer won't listen or do anything anyway?

This fear was brought starkly home to me in one company I was advising where the employee eventually dared to complain about the way his manager treated him. The company was sympathetic, investigated the matter but no action was taken. Worse still, shortly afterwards the manager was promoted and the employee made redundant. It was coincidental that this happened but the effect on morale was disastrous and confidence in management was seriously damaged.

If employers truly understand these issues and their employees' concerns, then that is at least a start to solving the problem.

In my next article, I'll be describing what companies can do to deal effectively with staff who have a complaint.

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