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Whistleblowing: When It Works and Why

Roberta Ann Johnson
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The nearest moral substitute for righting a wrong is exposing it-blowing the whistle. Much of the exposed wrongdoing that makes the evening news nowadays is of a magnitude beyond the ability of most individuals to rectify, and whistle-blowing therefore offers the most direct means to the desired end, though the way may be fraught with pitfalls, especially when the whistle-blower is employed by the wrong-doer, as is typically the case.

Rarely is the motive selfish; ordinarily an employee who reveals illegal or harmful practices is acting to serve a greater good than his or her own, and recognizes that the immediate consequence may be retribution in the form of demotion, dismissal, or worse. The author, a political science professor at the University of San Francisco, has compiled an array of case studies, which she examines in light of an “ethics checklist” developed by ethicist Sissela Bok, who believes that whistle-blowing can best be understood by asking and answering basic questions about the causes and consequences of the whistle-blower’s dissent. For example: Is whistle-blowing the last and only alternative? How closely linked to the wrongdoing are those accused? Is there no time to use routine channels? Does the public have a right to know? Are the motives not self-serving?

Johnson demonstrates how Bok’s list may be applied to Roger Boisjoly’s revelations about the faulty “O-rings” in the Challenger space shuttle and to Cindy Ossias’s disclosures of the corruption that resulted in reduced insurance payouts to victims of the 1994 earthquake near Northridge, California. Answering Bok’s questions clarifies fundamental ethical issues as well as providing guidance at each stage in the whistle-blowing process.

Hugh Kaufman became a whistle-blower in the late 1970s when he was the EPA’s chief toxic waste investigator. Through testimony before congressional committees and tactical interviews in the media, he drew attention to problems at hazardous-waste sites nationwide-including Love Canal-which he said posed a danger to public health.

Later, having weathered the storm at EPA, he successfully championed another cause, opposing the Reagan administration’s efforts to redirect environmental policy and reduce what was perceived as excessive regulation. His efforts put him into Johnson’s higher category of “policy entrepreneurs”-whistle-blowers whose actions have far-reaching effects on policy. For this category she has constructed her own checklist of critical questions, which she applies in other contexts, such as Barbara Moulton’s assault on the FDA’s failure to enforce laws dealing with the safety and misbranding of prescription drugs, notably Thalidomide.

In analyzing the phenomenon of whistle-blowing, Johnson calls attention to important distinctions both practical and ethical and makes clear how much is owed to the individuals whose cases she studies.

HAROLD CORDRY (March / April 2003)

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