

Speaking out: what you need to know

You've encountered a major problem, such as corruption, abuse of procedures, or dangers to the public or environment. What should you do about it? Before taking action, it's worthwhile first to learn more and consider your options. Here are some suggestions.

Gather more information

The more serious the problem, the more evidence you need. Discretely make copies of documents. Save emails. Obtain signed and dated written statements from witnesses. Make absolutely sure you have the facts right. Obtain more evidence than you ever imagined necessary. Make several back-up copies of all key documents.



"Encouraging dissent is a good way of finding out who the traitors are."

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Be prepared for reprisals

If you speak out, you might be lucky and be thanked and even rewarded. However, many who speak out are shocked when they suffer reprisals, including

- petty harassment
- ostracism (people don't talk to you or cut you out of the loop)
- threats and accusations
- reprimands
- forced transfers
- referral to employer psychiatrists
- legal actions
- demotion
- dismissal
- blacklisting (so you can't get another job).



Source: www.CartoonStock.com

This all sounds horrible. It is! It's bad for your income, relationships and health. Be prepared for the worst.

Learn about your organisation

Find out how your workplace operates. Ask wise members about past experiences. Observe who has power and how it is exercised. Learn what happened when others spoke out. But be careful who you talk to.

Consult

Talk with family and friends. Check with co-workers — but only those you completely trust. Obtain advice from independent sources. Talk to those who've done what you're planning to do: talk to whistleblowers.

Consider your options

- *Do nothing.* Sometimes it's safer and wiser to bide your time.
- *Resign.* Getting away sometimes is best for your health and career. If possible, get another job first.
- *Leak information to people who can act.* This is usually safer than speaking out, but can still be risky. Seek expert advice and be very careful.
- *Speak out — become a whistleblower.* Do this only if you've gathered rock-solid evidence, made connections with allies and are prepared for reprisals.



Credit: George B Wills, Blacksburg, Virginia

Be wary

Sometimes reporting a matter to your boss works out fine. But often it's the beginning of reprisals. Don't rely on any person or body to fix the problem. Again, consider your options.

- *Report up the line of command.* This is what you're expected to do, but sometimes it doesn't work — it may be where the problem originated — and may open you to reprisals.
- *Report to hotlines, ombudsmen, anti-corruption agencies and other watchdog bodies.* Many whistleblowers say these bodies don't help. They are slow, focus on technicalities and may not be able to solve the problem or give you adequate protection. So don't rely on official bodies. First check their track records of dealing with other complaints.
- *Expose the situation via leaflets, emails, webpages or going to the media.* This is a big step. In many big cases, it achieves results.

This information is provided by Whistleblowers Australia, an independent non-government organisation largely made up of whistleblowers, and is based on our personal experiences and talking with thousands of other whistleblowers over the years. For more information, search for us on the web.

