

Engineering Ethics

Lecture 8



Whistle-blowing

- ❑ Whistle-blowing occurs when an employee or former employee conveys information about a significant moral problem to someone in a position to take action on the problem, and does so outside approved organizational channels (or against strong pressure).
- ❑ The definition has four main parts.
 - ❑ **Disclosure:** Information is intentionally conveyed outside approved organizational (workplace) channels or in situations where the person conveying it is under pressure from supervisors or others not to do so.
 - ❑ **Topic:** The information concerns what the person believes is a significant moral problem for the organization (or an organization with which the company does business). Examples of significant problems are serious threats to public or employee safety and well-being, criminal behavior, unethical policies or practices, and injustices to workers within the organization.
 - ❑ **Agent:** The person disclosing the information is an employee or former employee, or someone else closely associated with the organization (as distinct, say, from a journalist reporting what the whistle-blower says).
 - ❑ **Recipient:** The information is conveyed to a person or organization that is in a position to act on the problem (as distinct, for example, to telling it to a family member or friend who is in no position to do anything). The desired response or action might consist in remedying the problem or merely alerting affected parties.



Whistle-blowing

- ❑ **External whistleblowing** when the information is passed outside the organization.
- ❑ **Internal whistleblowing** when the information is conveyed to someone within the organization (but outside approved channels or against pressures to remain silent).
- ❑ **Open whistleblowing**, in which individuals openly reveal their identity as they convey the information.
- ❑ **Anonymous whistleblowing**, which involves concealing one's identity.



❑ Under what conditions are engineers justified in whistle-blowing?

1. The actual or potential harm reported is serious.
2. The harm has been adequately documented.
3. The concerns have been reported to immediate superiors.
4. After not getting satisfaction from immediate superiors, regular channels within the organization have been used to reach up to the highest levels of management.
5. There is reasonable hope that whistle-blowing can help prevent or remedy the harm.



Common Sense Procedures

- ❑ There are several rules of practical advice and common sense that should be heeded before taking this action
 1. Except for extremely rare emergencies, always try working **first through normal organizational channels**. Get to know both the formal and informal (unwritten) rules for making appeals within the organization.
 2. **Be prompt in expressing objections**. Waiting too long may create the appearance of plotting for your advantage and seeking to embarrass a supervisor.
 3. **Proceed in a tactful, low-key manner**. Be considerate of the feelings of others involved. Always keep focused on the issues themselves, **avoiding any personal criticisms** that might create antagonism and deflect attention from solving those issues.
 4. As much as possible, **keep supervisors informed of your actions**, both through informal discussion and formal memorandums.
 5. **Be accurate in your observations and claims, and keep formal records documenting relevant events**.
 6. Consult trusted colleagues for advice—**avoid isolation**.
 7. Before going outside the organization, **consult the ethics committee of your professional society**.
 8. **Consult a lawyer concerning potential legal liabilities**.

