

# Ethics: Practical Aspects



Fariborz Taghipour

# Whistle-Blowing



# Whistle-Blowing

A subject of controversy, Snowden has been variously called a hero, a whistleblower, a dissident, a patriot, and a traitor.



Edward Snowden

Computer professional, former CIA employee, and former contractor for the US Government

# What is Whistleblowing?

- “Release of information *by a member or former member of an organisation* that is evidence of illegal and/or immoral conduct in the organisation or conduct in the organisation that is not in the public interest.”
- there must be information, evidence of misconduct
- information must be released outside normal channels of communication (external/internal whistleblowing)
- must be done voluntarily
- must be undertaken as a moral protest (motive is important)

(source: Boatright 2003)

# Why is Whistleblowing Controversial?

## FUNDAMENTAL TENSION BETWEEN

- The need for employees to feel able to exercise moral agency (i.e. follow their conscience and/or their professional ethos)
- Public interest

## AND

- Loyalty of employees to their employers / do the best for the organisation
- Need for organisations to protect commercially sensitive information
- Consequences for employees

# What Employees Should Consider when Faced with Situation in Which They Might Blow the Whistle

- Stay calm.
- Remember that you are a witness, and not a complainant.
- Think about the risks and outcomes before you act.
- Let the facts speak for themselves - don't make ill-considered allegations.
- Remember that you may be mistaken or that there may be an innocent or good explanation.
- Do not become a private detective.
- Recognise that you may not be thanked.

(source: Public Concern at Work)



# Whistle-Blowing

***Whistle-blowing*** can be defined as raising a concern about wrongdoing within an organization (e.g. misconduct, alleged dishonest or illegal activities).

The whistle-blower is fulfilling his/her **duty to safeguard the public**, and exercising the **right to disclose wrongdoing**.

However, the whistle-blower may be fired (wrongful dismissal in B.C.), punished, or thereafter have life in the company made miserable.

# Types of Whistle-Blowing

**Internal:** Employee goes over the head of the immediate supervisor, e.g. to the company CEO or Board of Directors.

**External:** Employee reports the perceived wrongdoing to a newspaper, a well-known outside expert in the field, or a law-enforcement body.



# When is Whistle Blowing Justifiable?

- The matter in question must be important. Failure to act could result in harm to people and/or the environment.
- The whistleblower must have clear first-hand knowledge of the infraction(s) (not hearsay), as well as relevant expertise.
- All other actions within the power of the employee should have been exhausted.
- All internal avenues of communication should be exhausted before seeking outside help.

# Case Study:

Julia works for a multi-national company which builds and operates waste incinerators.

Julia finds that, in violation of the BC Special Waste legislation, the company is accepting wastes from a local rendering plant. Handling of these wastes and emissions from their incineration could be harmful to operators, to a nearby village, and to surrounding ranching activities.

Julia tells her boss, who ignores her concern. She then writes to the Chair of the company's "Policy and Oversight Committee", but receives no response and finds, after repeated attempts to follow up, that the committee is defunct.

## Her choices now:

- a) Call the local newspaper.
- b) Try to see the company president.
- c) Write to the Board of Directors.
- d) Call the Ministry of the Environment?
- e) Contact the Professional Engineers Association.
- f) Quit and take another job elsewhere.
- g) Give up, having done her best.
- h) Other??

**What should she do?**

# Reference

Oliver, D., Whistle-blowing engineer,  
DOI:10.1061/(ASCE)1052-3928(2003)129:4(246)