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# CHAPTER 4

## WHISTLE BLOWING

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When an employee discovers unethical, immoral or illegal actions at work, the employee makes a decision about what to do with this information. **Whistle blowing** is the term used to define an employee's decision to disclose this information to an authority figure (boss, media or government official).

The topic of this chapter is whistle blowing. The purpose of this chapter is to help teachers and students to learn more about how employees make their decisions to come forward with **potentially damaging information** and about how employees identify strong ethical employment environments and, in turn, avoid potentially unethical employers.

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### BACKGROUND INFORMATION

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Whistle blowing leads to good and bad results. In this chapter, we will explore both. First, the benefits of carefully considered whistle blowing can lead to the end of unethical business practices. The lives of individuals and whole communities have been saved by whistleblowers. Severe damage to the environment has been stopped by the actions of one individual who blew the whistle on an unethical employer. Here are some examples of serious ethical violations that have resulted in whistle blowing. These examples represent significant consequences to businesses:

- Dumping of toxic waste
- Padding an expense report
- Violating laws about hiring and firing
- Violating laws about workplace safety
- Violating health laws which lead to documented illness and even death

The actions of whistleblowers are potentially beneficial to society. Businesses that engaged in unethical practices have been shut down because of the actions of whistleblowers. Lives have been saved, and severe damage to the environment has been averted because of the courage and persistence of whistleblowers.

At the same time, an employee who witnesses unethical business practices at work may want to think carefully before making the decision to inform an authority of the practice. The consequences of whistle blowing are often extreme and include possible firing, civil action, or even imprisonment.

Furthermore, an employee may want to follow the rule of "chain of command" – that is, begin to discuss issues of whistle blowing with his or her immediate supervisor first, before discussing the matter with anyone else. A great deal of information about whistle blowing, whistleblower's rights and protection, whistleblowers in many countries and in many professions (sports, the tobacco industry, chemical industry, and even the government) is available on the Internet. A list of some of those sites, with links to others, appears later in this chapter (see [Internet Resources](#)).

Company loyalty is an internationally held value. Employees want positive work environments. Most workers do not like to have disagreements with their bosses. At the same time, bosses and managers do not want employees to complain to others in the workplace about a problem that the manager might be able to solve. Complaining to one's colleagues can be harmful to morale and should not be confused with careful thinking and action on behalf of unethical business practices. One company's unethical practices were uncovered by an employee who was later **fired** for "blowing the whistle." No employee wants to be branded as having bad judgment.

When should an employee blow the whistle? When should he or she "**keep quiet**"? Experts have set guidelines for whistle blowing. Some of those are listed below.

### **Guidelines for Whistle blowing**

This list is a guideline that will help an employee to determine if a situation merits whistle blowing.

1. *Magnitude of consequences*

An employee considering whistle blowing must ask himself or herself these questions: How much harm has been done or might be done to **victims**? Will the victims really be "**beneficiaries**"? If one person is or will be harmed, it is unlikely to be a situation that warrants whistle blowing.

2. *Probability of effect*

The probability that the action will actually take place and will cause harm to many people must be considered. An employee should be very sure that the action in question will actually happen. If the employee does not know if the action will happen and if the action will harm people (or the environment), the employee should reconsider his or her plan to blow the whistle. In addition, the employee must have absolute proof that the event will occur and that people (or the environment) will be harmed.

3. *Temporal immediacy*

An employee must consider the length of time between the present and the possibly harmful event. An employee must also consider the urgency of the problem in question. The more immediate the consequences of the potentially unethical practice, the stronger the case for whistle blowing. For example, the effects of toxic waste dumping that are likely to occur in a week are more pressing than the firing of 100 employees next year.

4. *Proximity*

The physical closeness of the potential victims must be considered. For example, a company that is depriving workers of medical benefits in a nearby town has a higher proximity than one 1,000 miles away. The question arises about matters of **emotional proximity** or situations in

which the ethical question relates to a victim with some emotional attachment to the whistleblower.

5. *Concentration of Effort*

A person must determine the intensity of the unethical practice or behavior. The question is how much intensity does the specific infraction carry. For example, according to this principle, stealing \$1,000 from one person is more unethical than stealing \$1 from 1,000 people.

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## CLASSROOM APPLICATIONS

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### WARM UP ACTIVITY

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**(approximately 10-20 minutes)**

*Objectives*

To generate student interest in this topic and to introduce new vocabulary and grammar

*Procedures*

1. Introduce the topic by bringing a whistle to class. Now, tell students that today we will address the topic of Whistle blowing. Write the word *Whistle blowing* on the board, and blow your whistle (Note: some teachers will want to omit this step). Ask students if they know what the term means. Solicit guesses.
2. Dictate the definition of whistle blowing on page 1 to students. Tell students: You will hear the dictation three times. The first time, I will read the passage at normal speed and you should listen. Do not write during the first reading. The second time I read the passage, I will read in chunks and you should write every word you hear. The third time, I will read again at normal speed. You should check your writing for errors and correct them. You will be given one minute at the end to re-read your writing and make final corrections. Collect the dictation and correct it.
3. Collect the dictations and solicit questions from students on their understanding of the concept of whistle blowing.
4. Tell students they are now ready to start learning about whistle blowing.



## ACTIVITY #1

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**(approximately 20-30 minutes)**

### *Objectives*

- To encourage students to think about whistle blowing and its ramifications
- To solicit student point of view on the topic of whistle blowing

### *Procedures*

1. Present [Appendix B](#) How To Review Your Potential Employer On Ethics. Make copies of Appendix B and pass them out to the students. Review student questions about vocabulary and grammar as needed. Use [Appendix A](#) which lists the vocabulary, as needed.
2. Have students complete the form individually. (Note: Doing this step in pairs or small groups is not advised. Students will have difficulty reaching an agreement. Responses do not require consensus.)
3. Ask students to think of a question they might add to the form.
4. Have students answer all questions and discuss their responses in small groups of approximately four students.

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## ACTIVITY #2

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**(Approximately 30-40 minutes)**

### *Objectives*

- To encourage students to think about business ethical issues as they relate whistle blowing in their own academic, professional or work contexts
- To develop more fluency in using the terms related to whistle blowing
- To point out the issues that underlie contextual specificity of whistle blowing
- To gain more comfort and competence in using Internet sources for professional and academic work

### *Procedures*

1. Introduce the activity by saying that this activity will provide students with the chance to learn more and be better able to understand the importance of business ethics in today's world.

2. Now that you have considered business ethics in terms of your own employment [Appendix A](#), let us discuss the matter of whistle blowing in students' own experiences.
3. Begin with a short lecture that summarizes the points made in the background information section of this chapter (see Background).
4. Following the summary, the teacher will next ask this question: What experience do you have with whistle blowing? Brainstorm this experience as a whole class for 1-2 minutes. Then, assign students to work in small groups (3-5 students). One student records brief descriptions of each of the others' stories. The teacher should encourage the students to draw on their own past experiences, those of a relative or family member and to use at least one of the web sites listed in the [Internet Resources](#) section of this chapter.
5. At the end of this step, each student will have a specific context for analyzing the concept of whistle blowing
6. Next, students will identify the benefits and challenges for whistleblowers in the situation that they have identified. Students should jot down those benefits and challenges on a sheet of paper labeled on the left "Benefits" and the right, "Challenges."
7. Students will evaluate each benefit and each challenge on their lists against the guidelines for whistleblowers provided in the Background section of this chapter. Students may wish to add items to their lists or to modify those items in order to make them appropriate for the context in which they study or work.
8. Students will present their work to their classmates in the group. Specifically, each student presents to the group their lists of benefits, challenges and guidelines. Together, the group makes a recommendation for or against whistle blowing.
9. Finally, an elected member of each group presents in brief form the following: One interesting business ethical case (chosen among the five presented), the benefits of whistle blowing, the challenges for the whistleblower and the group's recommendation to the whistleblower on whether or not he or she should blow the whistle.

Note: In Step 4, teacher should circulate among the groups and listen for expression problems and offer to help with vocabulary and other language and content questions. Also, a teacher could modify Step 6 for a small class with each student making a carefully structured presentation to the class on his or her case. Use of evaluation tools presented in previous chapters (or adapted versions of those) is appropriate here.

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## COOL DOWN ACTIVITY

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### *Objectives*

- To conclude the lesson
- To give students the opportunity to reflect on what they have learned

### *Procedures*

1. Tell the students: We are now going to conclude the lesson on whistle blowing. We have begun to learn some things about whistle blowing - when to do it, and how and what some of the issues are that face business professionals who consider this action. Laws usually guide ethical decision-making. But sometimes, like the situation we will now consider, there are conflicting legal guidelines, and companies are left to make the ethical decision that is based on the moral leadership and good judgment of the leaders.
2. We shall consider the biggest dilemma that faces business ethics! What if a company in the host country operates with moral reasoning and judgment that supports economic development, while a company in another country operates without consideration for economic development. Consider issues about payment for service on a contract, investment in a country with discriminatory policies against groups within its population, the application of safety standards in a plant, environmental practices, and poverty level wages in a country where new operations are underway.

In this case, the right decision would be the less ethnocentric one: A practice is permissible if the answer to these two questions is "no":

1. Is it possible to conduct business successfully in the host country without adopting this practice?
2. Is the practice a clear violation of a fundamental international human right?
3. Ask students: What do you think of this reasoning? What would you suggest a company do that faces ethical conflicts across national borders? How would you decide?
4. Have students try to answer this question based on what they have learned in this chapter. They can write or talk about it. In either case, students should be guided in the discussion or writing with careful ground rules and guidelines.

Note: This activity will work well with most students. If students are highly motivated by this project, you may want to carry this discussion further or extend the work into another class period.



## LESSON EXTENSIONS

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To extend [Activity 2](#) students can surf the Internet for case studies in whistle blowing. Make a list of the issues that most challenge business today.

- Students can enter chat rooms where they can discuss whistle blowing. They can offer their perspective, particularly on issues of international or national concern.
- Students can consider local cases of whistle blowing, analyze results, and find out what others think about these cases via e-mail exchanges with colleagues in other countries and cities and visits to web sites.
- Here's a chat room for whistleblowers. Read what others have written here and write your own posting!  
<http://www.experienceproject.com/groups/Whistleblower/220422/forum>
- A situation that is considered appropriate for whistle blowing in one cultural context (or even within a specific professional culture) may be different from that of another. Have students extend their lists (from [Activity 1](#)) to include the characteristics of specific culture contexts (or perhaps professional cultures) in matters of whistle blowing.



## INTERNET RESOURCES

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The Internet resources listed below provide useful information to those wishing to know more about whistle blowing. The sites marked with an asterisk (\*) point visitors to other web sites on the same topic.

- <http://www.whistleblowers.org/>  
This web site provides useful information for employees on their rights as whistleblowers under the United States legal system with specific reference to government and corporate contexts.
- [http://fairwhistleblower.ca/wbers/wb\\_self\\_help.html](http://fairwhistleblower.ca/wbers/wb_self_help.html)  
Web site for FAIR (Federal Accountability Initiative for Reform) promotes integrity and accountability within government by empowering employees to speak out without fear of reprisal when they encounter wrongdoing. Our aim is to support legislation and management practices that will provide effective protection for whistleblowers and hence occupational free speech in the workplace.

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## APPENDIX A

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### Some Terms and Phrases

**Beneficiaries:** Those individuals who benefit from unethical business practices

**Dumping of toxic waste:** An unethical business practice of disposing of poisonous or otherwise dangerous materials in a place where the materials will cause harm to individuals, groups of individuals and the environment

**Emotional proximity:** The closeness of the relationship between the whistleblower and the victims of unethical business practices

**Fired (from a job):** When an employee is asked to leave his/her job (in this case, due to having revealed potentially damaging information)

**Keep quiet:** Hold back information that is potentially damaging (in this case, an employee deciding not to tell an authority about potentially unethical behavior or practices.)

**Magnitude of consequences:** The severity of an employee's punishment if he or she blows the whistle. Magnitude of consequences must be measured against the impact of the potentially unethical practice when an employee is trying to decide whether or not to blow the whistle.

**Padding an expense report:** When an employee adds personal expenses to his/her list of business-related expenses

**Potentially damaging information:** Facts that may lead an employee to consider blowing the whistle

**Victims:** Those individuals or groups who are harmed by unethical business practices

**Whistle blowing:** An employee's decision to disclose potentially damaging information to an authority figure (boss, media or government official)

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## APPENDIX B

### How to Review Your Potential Employer on Ethics

Yes <input type="checkbox"/>	1. Do leaders in the company seem to communicate a sense of ethical standards?
No <input type="checkbox"/>	
Yes <input type="checkbox"/>	2. Are the company's goals realistic about profit and competition?
No <input type="checkbox"/>	
Yes <input type="checkbox"/>	3. Does the company have a code of ethics?
No <input type="checkbox"/>	
Yes <input type="checkbox"/>	4. Does the company's literature show concern for moral issues?
No <input type="checkbox"/>	
Yes <input type="checkbox"/>	5. Does the company's literature show concern for environmental issues?
No <input type="checkbox"/>	
Yes <input type="checkbox"/>	6. Is there an employee handbook with guidelines for handling issues of discrimination?
No <input type="checkbox"/>	
Yes <input type="checkbox"/>	7. Is there an employee handbook with guidelines for handling issues of sexual harassment?
No <input type="checkbox"/>	
Yes <input type="checkbox"/>	8. Is there an employee handbook with guidelines for handling issues of employee misconduct?
No <input type="checkbox"/>	
Yes <input type="checkbox"/>	9. Are the goods and services delivered to customers in a professionally ethical way?
No <input type="checkbox"/>	

What other questions do you have about ethics in this company? Write those here:

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