

The psychology of whistleblowing: why do some blow the whistle and others not?

Whistleblowing is the act of speaking up to expose unethical or unlawful activity within an organisation. What motivates this act can vary from a sense of duty, a desire to protect others from harm, or a belief in the importance of transparency and accountability. So, what drives an individual to blow the whistle? In this briefing, we consider some of the key psychological factors that influence whether or not someone will blow the whistle on wrongdoing.

The decision to blow the whistle can be a difficult one since it often involves going against the norms and values of an organisation and brings with it the risk of retaliatory action. What are the factors that affect whether or not an individual will blow the whistle?

Research suggests that the following two factors may mean someone is *more* likely to blow the whistle:

- **Personal integrity:** individuals with a strong sense of personal integrity and a commitment to ethical behaviour are more likely to blow the whistle. [Research](#) suggests that whistleblowers are driven by a belief that they are

doing the right thing and have a duty to expose wrongdoing. In addition, whistleblowers may experience a sense of guilt or shame from being associated with an employer who engages in unethical behaviour and feel driven to speak up.

- **Courageousness:** individuals who witness unethical or unlawful activity within their organisation may be afraid to speak up for fear of losing their job or facing other negative consequences. This fear is not unfounded. [Studies](#) have shown that whistleblowers are often subject to retaliation from their colleagues, supervisors and even the general public. It takes a great deal of personal courage to speak up in spite of these risks.

Other factors may *deter* someone from blowing the whistle, including:

- **Loyalty:** another factor intrinsic to the psychology of whistleblowing is the concept of loyalty. Employees are likely to struggle with the decision to come forward, feeling torn between loyalty to their employer and their sense of moral duty. This can lead to a great deal of internal conflict and anxiety, and, ultimately, may deter someone from speaking up.

- **Fear of isolation:** whistleblowers are often seen as “troublemakers” and may be ostracised by their colleagues. This can lead to feelings of loneliness and a lack of social support, which, in turn, can be damaging to mental health. Faced with this, many will decide to stick with the herd rather than stand alone and speak up.

In conclusion, the psychology of whistleblowing is a complex and multi-faceted issue. Fear, loyalty, and isolation are all factors that can prevent employees from coming forward with concerns. Despite these challenges, those who decide to blow the whistle play a critical role in exposing wrongdoing in organisations. It is important for employers to embed a supportive culture that values transparency and encourages employees to come forward with concerns without fear of retaliation. In addition, employers should provide whistleblowers with the resources and support they need to navigate the difficult process of speaking up.

BDBF is a leading employment law firm based at Bank in the City of London. If you would like to discuss a whistleblowing issue, please contact info@bdbf.co.uk, or your usual BDBF contact.