



ETHICAL LEADERSHIP CULTURE & TECHNOLOGY GOVERNANCE & COMPLIANCE

# How to Be Smart About Executive Whistleblowing: Q&A with Andrea Bonime-Blanc

Marguerite McNeal November 19, 2013 Governance & Compliance



Exposing wrongdoing is risky for anybody, but senior executives have an especially tricky time **blowing the whistle**, says Andrea Bonime-Blanc, CEO of **GEC Risk**, a New York-based governance, risk and reputation consultancy. On top of personal and professional — and potentially legal — dangers, they rarely receive a recovery and often end up ostracized, she says. Here, Bonime-Blanc shares her advice on how CEOs can ease the burden on senior executives by promoting a culture of transparency.

### Why is whistleblowing especially tough for senior executives?

First, senior executives have a high level of visibility to their team and to the overall organization. This really puts them in the spotlight. Also there's a lot of peer pressure that's associated with being part of senior management — especially if you're part of the C-suite — to conform with the way things are done at the company.

The CEO's leadership style and culture also have an impact. If you have an open CEO, bringing up an issue is not going to be too difficult. If you have more of a command-and-control CEO who doesn't tolerate dissent, then a senior executive will have a harder time bringing up challenging issues.

### Are there steps that a CEO can take to make it easier for senior execs to blow the whistle?

We need to think about what "blowing the whistle" means. Part of the challenge here is that language is loaded with negative connotations, meanings that we react to viscerally. At the same time, being a whistleblower is a very serious issue. There's a difference between a whistleblower, who is someone who's had a hard time bringing up an issue because it's a really difficult issue like fraud or corruption, and someone who just wants to **speak up** about an issue that may or may not have compliance and legal implications.

If it's a senior executive with a really "serious" whistleblower-worthy issue, the only way that a CEO can make it safe to speak up is to nurture a real culture—not just a stated culture—of zero tolerance for violations of law, support for conducting business in an ethical way, where standards and the code of conduct mean something. If the CEO stands behind these statements not just in word but also in deed, it makes it that much easier for a senior executive

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to voice a concern.

**If a senior executive wants to expose wrongdoing, what should she do first?**

Politics and culture and leadership differ for every company, but the average senior executive with an issue should certainly turn to trusted resources within the organization. If you've discovered something that concerns you, but don't know all the facts yet, turn to someone in the executive suite who has some responsibility for the issue, such as the general counsel or the chief ethics and compliance officer, maybe internal audit or maybe the CFO.

You will, however, want to pick your trusted advisor carefully depending on what the issue is and where it falls within the structure of the organization. If it's fraud within the accounting department, for example, then maybe the CFO isn't the greatest resource.

**Will negative attitudes about whistleblowing ever change?**

The word whistleblowing is fraught with negative connotations. We need to talk about the value to the business of doing business with integrity and recognizing those who speak up about concerns as "loyal" to the company instead of "treacherous whistleblowers." When CEOs and boards pay greater attention to this issue and get behind it, they will help to foster a better culture that will allow issues to be discovered and dealt with early on rather than fester over time and explode. We should be moving toward characterizing people who bring up concerns not as whistle blowers but as "internal reporters" or some other neutral term that describes what they are actually doing – helping the company and its stakeholders.

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