The Edge: There are ways to report misconduct

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There is something going on at work that you think is wrong. Are you unsure with whom to share your concerns? Are you worried if you say something, it will affect you, your job, or your next promotion or raise?

You are not alone. This scenario affects everyone, from entry-level employees to senior executives.

A recent National Business Ethics Survey of the U.S. Workforce conducted by The Ethics Resource Center found that 41 percent of people in the workforce have seen misconduct in their workplace. Of the 41 percent, only about six of 10 people (63 percent) reported what they saw or experienced to someone in the business or to an external party. One in five who reported misconduct experienced some sort of retaliation. The study also noted that employees say "almost a quarter of the infractions they observe are committed by senior executives and that middle-managers and first-line supervisors combined account for another 36 percent of workplace misconduct."

If you find yourself observing misconduct or wrong doing in your workplace, take a moment to examine how and where you can communicate your concerns. Raising concerns to your
supervisor or manager, often the initial place people think about to raise an issue, is not always possible because of their possible involvement.

Here are some possible avenues:

• Higher management. Your supervisor’s manager, the CEO or even the board may be a good resource. However, it is important to know that the concerns you share will most likely not stay solely with that member of higher management. An ethical leader will take some action. It may not be the first time this issue has arisen, and you may not see the actions taken or underway.

• Human resources. Seasoned HR professionals have likely dealt with issues similar to yours and already have an understanding of the impact such actions can have on individual employees as well as the business.

• Ethics and compliance officers. Businesses that have developed ethics and compliance programs usually have procedures in place to identify and address problems in effective ways. Bear in mind that these functions are mainly focused on the ethical behavior of the business or company, but these departments may have a process in place to allow reporting of wrongdoing in an anonymous fashion.

Regarding retaliation – it is true that reporting misconduct can have negative consequences for the person reporting it. In the Ethics Resource Center Survey, one in five people who reported wrongdoing experienced retaliation. If you are concerned that you may suffer retaliation for surfacing misconduct, raise or discuss retaliation and the limits of confidentiality with the channel you select (management, HR, ethics) before you disclose. Alternatively, find out if your company has an 800 line for reporting misconduct anonymously. Remember to turn off your caller ID.

It is also possible that your company may have another disclosure channel such as an ombudsman, which in most cases can maintain your anonymity as well as discuss options for going forward via an off the record procedure.

If you choose to disclose, regardless to whom you are communicating, ensure you clearly describe what you saw or heard (actions, emails, conversations). If you are sharing second-hand knowledge, make sure to communicate that.

Many people have a natural instinct to look the other way and avoid conflict or confrontation. It is an option to walk away, but for businesses that have strong ethical leaders, there should be a goal to root out negative behaviors, policies in place to reinforce ethical performance and a safe method or place to communicate infractions.
Feeling good about the place you work is important; consider your own ethics when making the decision.

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