

Why Are Some Whistleblowers Vilified and Others Celebrated?

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In a recent whistleblower case, Daniel Donovan, an information manager at Volkswagen, filed a lawsuit claiming he was unlawfully fired because people at the company feared that he was going to report to authorities the destruction of documents related to VW's installation of illegal software on diesel engines in order to cheat on emissions tests. (He later withdrew the case after what some suspect was a private settlement.)

Research on whistleblowing has found that Mr. Donovan's alleged treatment is the rule rather than the exception: Those who speak out about wrongdoing in organizations often suffer retaliation – both at their current organization and in their attempt to find future employment.

Similarly, studies by Benoit Monin and his colleagues on “moral rebels” demonstrate that when an individual witnesses a transgression but fails to speak up and a peer does speak up, that peer tends to be derogated by the individual who witnessed the wrongdoing but said nothing. The reason people often behave this way is their moral sense of self is threatened, and it leads them to attribute negative characteristics to the person who voiced concerns.

Are there contexts when those who speak up about wrongdoing are celebrated rather than disparaged? To answer that question Ned Wellman of Arizona State University, Maddy Ong and Scott DeRue of the University of Michigan, and I conducted three studies to examine whether the whistleblower’s level of legitimate power (i.e., whether that person is a formal leader or a peer) influences how others respond to his or her actions.

In the first study, we asked working adults to think about a time when someone in their organization did something unethical and another employee (a peer or a leader) spoke up (or did not speak up) about the wrongdoing. Consistent with our expectations, when peers spoke up they were viewed less positively than when leaders spoke up. The explanation for this finding is that people tend to value behavior in organizations that is in line with expectations for one’s role – and we expect leaders to be assertive and followers to be compliant.

In the second study, participants engaged in a hiring task. We provided participants with pictures and brief profiles of the candidates: an African-American male, a white female, and a white male. The white male candidate was always described as the best candidate. All participants chose the white male for the job. After selecting the candidate, they assessed a participant who previously took part in the study. We varied whether this person selected the white male or objected by saying that the experiment was racist and sexist. We also varied whether that individual was a leader or a peer. Once again, when peers spoke up, they were viewed less positively and were more likely to be the targets of various social sanctions (e.g., bullying, being insulted, being isolated) as compared to leaders.

In the third and final study, we used a fictional case about a team that was assigned to provide advice about entering a new market at a company that used inhumane child labor. We varied whether one of the team members went along with the policy or refused to take part because of the unethical actions of the company, and we also varied whether the person who spoke up was the team leader or a team member. We got the same result: Compared to a leader, when a teammate spoke up, participants in the study were more likely to view that person poorly, expressed intentions to sanction that individual in future interactions, and wrote harsh feedback to him or her. Interestingly, participants provided leaders harsher feedback when they didn’t speak up than when they did – presumably because they expected leaders to be more assertive.

Although the general perception is that courage has costs, our research suggests that conclusion should be more nuanced. People tend to denigrate their peers for speaking up because it is not viewed as their place, but they celebrate leaders who do so because they expect them to be the moral voice of organizations. An important implication of this research is that leaders have a critical responsibility both to speak up and to create a culture where employees are accountable to one another and the organization to report any wrongdoing.