# The Challenges Women Whistleblowers Face

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#### **Abstract**

Women Whistleblowers face unique challenges in the workplace.

The headline news of ethical concerns in business is transforming the workplace culture and the workforce. More women are beginning to step forward when ethical concerns arise. However they experience gender differences within the corporate culture when they come forward. Women often approach ethical concerns in a different manner than men. This article will bring research to this issue and uncover the unique challenges that women encounter as whistleblowers and the relationship of social status.

Keywords: Diversity, Gender, Women, Business, Workplace, Whistleblower

Women are gaining more notoriety for coming forward and dealing with tough ethical issues in the workplace. At the heart of the concern is whether this is a gender issue. The motivation may be different for women in making the decision to come forward, than for men. Women such as Sherron Watkins (Pillinger, 2003) have gained fame for stepping forward. Watkins is credited with exposing Enron. Women face unique repercussions and are often more hesitant to bring wrongdoing to the surface. "A combination of idealism, altruism, and concern that what is going on is hurting others prompts women who do not want to make a fuss or be in the limelight to sometimes become reluctant whistleblowers" (Bolen, 2008, p. 95). This paper will explore the unique challenges that women whistleblowers face.

# **Findings**

The term whistleblowing has been around for many years. One of the early federal laws enacted to protect whistleblowers came in 1972 under the Water Pollution Control Act (Franklin 2005). This act was formulated as a protection to employees against retaliation for coming forward with damaging information. In the mid eighties several more whistleblower protection laws were enacted. They too were designed to protect employees from retaliation. There are many laws today to protect employees who come forward with information and most organizations have their own internal policies with the same intentions.

For those that come forward, their life and career are never the same. While laws and polices have the best intentions to protect, people are going to act upon their own accord. Often there is an undercurrent in the environment that makes it very difficult for the whistleblower to remain in the organization. It is a life changing experience for most whistleblowers. Cynthia Cooper, the corporate whistleblower at the heart of the WorldCom scandal states that being a whistle blower was nothing she had envisioned or hoped to have been (Cooper 2008). The journey of a corporate whistleblower and a women whistleblower is not an easy road to go down. How does social status affect this issue? Social status in the workplace is about, equality, organizational power and position. When women step out of their perceived social status, retaliation can be the consequence.

Regardless of gender or who is blowing the whistle, the concept is the same. To better understand the concept, it makes sense to explore a couple of definitions. In her article *Encouraging Internal Whistleblowing in Organizations*, Lilanthi Ravishankar (2003, p. 1) defines whistleblowing as "employees who bring wrongdoing at their own organizations to the attention of superiors." That is a simple concept but since there are often legal complications that go along with whistleblowing it is prudent to look at another more descript definition.

Roberta Johnson (2002) defines whistleblowing as:

an act with these four components; one, an individual acts with the intention of making information public; two, the information is conveyed to parties outside the organization who make it public and part of the public record; three, the information has to do with possible or actual nontrivial wrongdoing in an organization; four, the person exposing the information is not a journalist or ordinary citizen but, a member or former member of the organization (p.3-4).

Nick Perry (1998, p. 235) has a more simplified definition: "Whistleblowers are defined as insiders who go public". It is important to understand that Whistleblowing has huge ramifications. Going public with information that will forever change the organization and likely their relationship with that organization, is a hard decision to

make. There is the irrevocable damage to the company and the individual employee. The stress can jeopardize health and family relationships. According to Alford (2002), most whistle blowers are never the same; they suffer a career loss and often loss of their family and relationships. We are taught to be loyal, and breaking that loyalty to do what is perceived is right is often a tough ethic quandary to face, especially for women.

As more women are climbing the corporate ladders and become part of the executive leadership, we are seeing more women in whistleblower situations. As we observe more women in these roles, their decision making and ethics are being scrutinized. Women whistleblowers gained notoriety in December of 2002, when Time magazine named the persons of the year, three corporate women whistleblowers (Lacayo & Ripley 2002).

The Time magazine cover in December 2002 featured three prominent whistleblowers; Cynthia Cooper of WorldCom, Colleen Rowley of the FBI, and Sherron Watkins of Enron. These were three women who did the extraordinary thing, by all coming forward to report corporate wrongdoing (Lacayo & Ripley, 2002). They were chosen as persons of the year because they were considered brave role models that were willing to stand for what was right. "The truest of true believers is more like it, ever faithful to the idea that where they worked was place that served the wider world in some important way" (Lacayo & Ripley, 2002, p. 2).

There is a lot of discussion on whether there is a gender component in who is the likelier whistleblower, a man or a woman? The debate is about which sex is more ethical. Some of the most famous corporate scandals can be attributed to men. This may be because fewer women were formerly in the corporate executive roles. Examples are the Ford Pinto disaster and the Dow-Corning toxic breast implants (Hoffman 1998). Because women have just gained more corporate influence over the last decade, it may be too soon to tell if they will make the same type of ethical blunders as did their male counterparts.

There are gender differences which effect decision making and the willingness to come forward to report wrongdoing. One of the differences stems from the theory that women are not part of the male network sometimes called the boys club (Pomeroy 2005). Part of the gender thinking difference goes back to lessons learned in childhood. According to Pomeroy winning is what boys are taught, while girls are taught to be nice and play fair (2005). Men and women are raised with a different value system. According to Glaser (2008, p. 1), "As young boys, men jockey for position in the playground and learn to give and take orders" she says that "If boys don't like the rule, they leave the game. Girls on the other hand, play in leaderless groups, not hierarchies, and choose games with far fewer rules". The inference is that if women don't think the rules are just and right, they won't play the game. The gender issue is about the conditioning we learned as children, suggesting that women may be more likely whistleblowers because of lessons learned in childhood games (Glaser).

Reflecting on our own childhood, it would seem that this theory hits home. Often girls are scolded for not sharing enough and not playing nice, while for boys it is more acceptable to not play nice so long as they win. The influence of the informal men's club that women are often not a part of can be observed in many corporate environments. When a female is the whistleblower, she is considered insubordinate, while males are praised for this same action (Rappeport 2008). If Rappeport has it right, this indicates a definite difference for a woman whistleblower in how they are viewed within their own organization.

Women also have their own networks. While women for the most part desire to be an insider in the boy's club, men do not strive to be included in the women's network. This may also go back to childhood learning. It seems common for a girl to be a tom-boy or one of the guys, but it is uncommon for a boy to be one of the girls. According to Andre and Velasquez women identify with the comradery of relationships and maintaining these relationships can be critically important (2008). This would give credence to the theory that woman who have built these network relationships, would be reluctant to come forward to report wrongdoing. Choosing loyalties is a very hard thing to do, when faced with discovering business improprieties. Cynthia Cooper the WorldCom executive sums up best "How many people have looked out this window with fear and anxiety?" (Cooper, 2008, p. 334). Women often have a lot of fear and anxiety about whistleblowing. Some believe it is because of the gender differences and others believe it is because women have more to risk. Social status is a key factor, as there is often an imbalance of power in male dominated organizations. According to Rehg, Miceli, Near and Van Scooter (2008), for women in supervisory positions in organizations dominated by males there is a social expectation of acquiescence. When a female becomes a whistleblower she is seen as a threat to the social norm.

Fred Alford (2002), states that women are often more tied to family than to their organization, which makes them more likely to come forward in the face of wrongdoing. Alford also brings up a good point in saying that because women are not part of the men's network; their outsider status gives them less to risk. They are not risking relationships, as they may not feel included in those relationships.

Another theory is that women are actually more likely to blow the whistle because they are not as entrenched in the organization as men are. According to Lacayo and Ripley (2002), gender does play a role and often these women feel less loyalty because they are viewed as outsiders. Allan Rapperpot (2008), states that studies indicate that women place a higher value on honesty than do men. In any case women seem to be getting all the attention for being whistleblowers. Men are still blowing the whistle but getting less attention. It is the type of attention that no one seeks or wants regardless of gender. Doing the right thing and the ethical thing has many long lasting repercussions. The reason a women may decide to come forward may be different than a man, but in both cases those that come forward and make the hard decision to do so, should be honored.

No matter the gender of the whistleblower, retaliation is almost always a given. According to Alford (2008), although there are laws to protect victims from retaliation most do experience some form of retaliation and are sufficiently damaged by the experience. Sherron Watkins credited as the whistleblower in the Enron scandal, was ignored after she came forward, and given no important projects or tasks for almost one year (Lacayo & Ripley). Watkins eventually left the company. Retaliation can be done in blatant ways or in less obvious ways that are hard to measure or prove.

Marcia Micelli co-authored a study conducted on a U.S. Airforce base that tackled how women experienced retaliation (Rehg, M., Miceli, M., Near, J., & Scotter, J. (2008). That study's research is partially represented in table 1 below.

# Insert Table 1 Here

The research by Rehg, Miceli, Near and Van Scooter (2008), supports that females are more often victims of retaliation than their male counterparts. Male whistleblowers experienced less retaliation than females. Their research is also based on *Social role theory* which is about power, social influences and those effects on gender (Carli and Eagly, 1999). It is the retaliation that women have the highest anxiety over. According to the Institute for Operations Research and the Management Sciences (2008), women do experience more retaliation than men. This information was obtained as a result of several surveys taken. Often there is a loss of power, verbal harassment and a feeling like big brother is watching (2008). It is no surprise that women are often reluctant to step forward and risk their careers to reveal critical information. Again for women it is often about going against the social norm and the consequences that may follow.

To truly understand the unique challenges that women whistleblowers face, careful consideration must be given to the issue of retaliation. It appears that it is the retaliation factor that looms for most women as the critical issue in coming forward. Stepping forward can be an agonizing and painful process. According to the Institute of Operations Research and the Management Sciences (2008), "The levels of retaliation as perceived by the woman we surveyed were greater than those perceived by men." The best way to fully illustrate the fear factor and of retaliation for women, is to explore some real cases of real women who experienced retaliation.

Laura Bastion was a Department of Defense employee working as a child physiologist assigned in Europe (Alford 2002). She was there to carry out a mandate that would ensure that all military personal with special needs children would be afforded the educational programs necessary to assist them in reaching their full potential. According to Alford the problem was that there were too many children to evaluate and she was ineffective at carrying out the mandated task. She wrote a report that indicated what the road blocks were, and it was not well received by her supervisor or the Pentagon. She told the truth, she laid out the issues; she stepped out of the social status level that was acceptable.

The retaliation that she experienced was to have her office relocated to the broom closet in the basement. Next she was asked to undergo a psychological evaluation (Alford p. 29). She was assigned to a new supervisor whose job seemed to be to watch her and write her up. Several negative performance evaluations followed, and she was pressured to resign her position. The Pentagon looked the other way while the retaliation was going on. But it doesn't end here for Laura Bastion. Laura was obviously a fighter, and believed in standing up for the truth and what is right, or she wouldn't have found herself in this situation.

She took her case to the federal courts for resolution and justice. Laura lost her appeal, but the appeal cost her one hundred thousand dollars (Alford 2002). Even thought there are laws to protect whistleblowers from retaliation, the retaliation does become a harsh reality for some. According to Glazer (1998, p. 66), "the legal process is slow and expensive, and it is difficult to obtain remedy for retaliation in the courts". When the victims of retaliation are women, other woman become wearier of standing up for what is right; this is due in part to social conditioning.

Grace Pierce was a research physician who was hired by Ortho pharmaceuticals to do research on an emerging drug called Loperamide (Glazer 1989). Her job was to determine the safety and recommend the drug for approval. Loperamide was in a liquid form and was used to treat acute diarrhea, which meant that children would be consumers of the final product. The drug had a high concentration of saccharin, which was used to masque the unpleasant flavor (Glazer).

Grace Pierce headed a research team where she was the only physician. The drug's high saccharin content bothered Pierce because saccharin was a known carcinogenic (Glazer). She stood up against her team when the recommendation was made to accept the high saccharin content (Glazer). According to Glazer, the retaliation that Grace Pierce suffered was in the form of having her integrity questioned and being falsely accused of misappropriation of funds.

Pierce ultimately resigned under the unpleasant circumstances. Like Laura Bastion, she also would attempt to take her case through the courts. She also lost her case. Pierce was a notable physician that formerly held positions of honor and respect. She resigned under a cloud of shame and it was difficult for her to maintain her career.

It is likely that as a woman, she overcame many obstacles to become a physician. Women have an uphill road in attaining equal respect in business. It is harder for a woman once brought down, to ever climb the corporate ladder again. Emotionally women do not rebound as easily as their male counterparts.

Grace Pierce saw her career destroyed because she stood up and would not allow a cancer causing drug to be approved for consumption. There is a lack of a support system for women that have become whistleblowers. The courts often fail to support them. Women are often perceived as outsiders (Lacayo & Ripley 2002), which puts them in the unique situation of having no support from their former colleagues. So for a woman the challenge in being a whistleblower is not only the retaliation but often the isolation.

### Conclusion

Becoming a whistleblower was not a premeditated act for any of the women profiled by Time magazine; Cynthia Cooper of WorldCom, Colleen Rowley of the FBI, or Sherron Watkins of Enron. It was not the goal of Laura Bastion or Grace Pierce. These are all women who came forward with information because their ethics and values told them it was the right thing to do. According to Pomeroy (2005) women do approach ethical concerns in a different manner then men, and that may explain why there have been so many women whistleblowers making the news lately.

What is different for women that come forward is the level of retaliation and the lack of support. According to the Institute of Operations Research and the Management Sciences (2008), women do feel higher levels of retaliation, a lack of support and no matter what level of power the woman had, she still had no support. The authors also note that the wrong-doer power may have an influence over the women's lower power. Social status in an organizational context is about power level and the expectation for that power level. In most all of the cases profiled in this paper, the wrong-doers happened to have been males, so the gender issue becomes more important. Women are often in lower power level positions, so gender and social equality become an issue. The unique challenge that a woman whistle blower faces is in being the outsider blowing the whistle. According to Lacayo and Ripley (2002), gender does play a role and often these women feel less loyalty because they are viewed as outsiders. Women will continue to blow the whistle and report wrong-doing no matter what the consequences are. However when their actions are perceived as not typical for their social status, retaliation is generally the consequence. Social status plays a significant role in the reason women become whistleblowers and the related consequences. Perception and social conditioning of social norms of women's position and power in the workplace will not change easily. Cynthia Cooper's advice to whistleblowers is this "educate yourself about what may happen once you come forward, know who you are at your core, avoid looking to others for self-worth, and move your life in a different direction (Cooper, 2008, p. 314)". While there may be unique challenges for women whistleblowers, knowing those challenges and being prepared for the major changes that will occur is the best recommendation.

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Table 1. Descriptive Statistics and Correlations for Male Subsample and Female Subsample (Second Line)

		М%	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6
1	Retaliation	-0.19	0. 59						
		0.32	1 .09						
2	Low whistle blower power	-0.62	0.80	0.33					
		-0.26	0.73	0.08					
3	Serious wrongdoing	-0.01	0.73	0.16	0.22				
		-0.12	0.71	0.32	-0.06				
4	Direct effect on whistleblower	0.21	0.74	0.29	0.18	0.20			
		0.74	0.80	0.42	0.05	0.05	0.14		
5	Lack of support	0.52	0.77	0.58	0.27	0.25	0.32		
		0.77	1.03	0.71	0.05	0.21	0.15		
6	Subsequent external support	14%	0.07	0.00	0.17	0.10	0.10		
		15%		0.45	0.06	0.13	0.21	0.30	
7	Relationship to supervisor	4.50	1.72	-0.27	-0.26	-0.04	-0.15	-0.15	.016
		4.18	1.86	-0.48	-0.12	-0.11	-0.25	-0.47	-0.20

Table from: Antecedents and Outcomes of Retaliation Against Whistleblowers: Gender Differences and Power Relationships. Rehg, Michael T.; Miceli, Marcia P.; Near, Janet P.; Van Scotter, James R. Organization Science, Mar/Apr2008, Vol. 19 Issue 2, p232.