
Tattling syndrome: What to do about it

by Carl R. Oliver, PhD

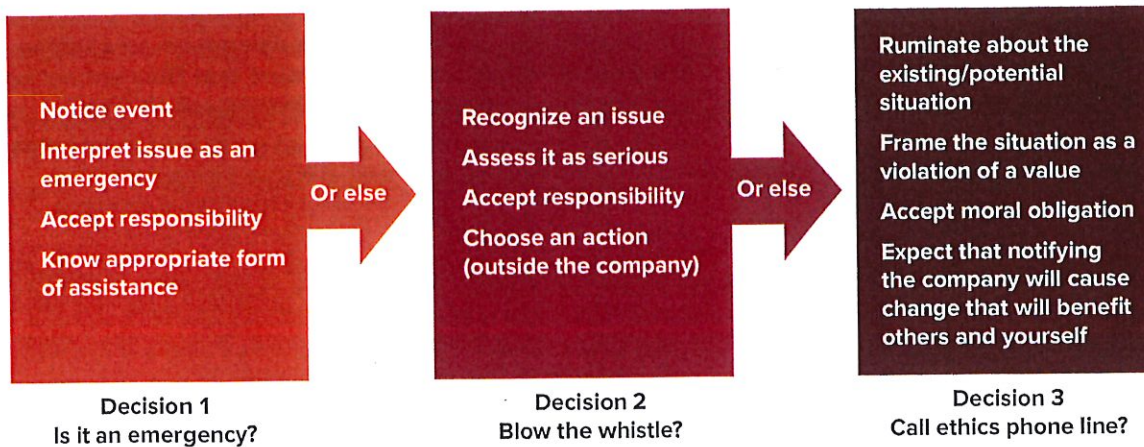
For every company, "tattling syndrome" is a fundamental problem. Cultural norms that discourage tattling plague corporate ethics programs and degrade their effectiveness. Employees resist speaking up when they see ethics problems. They grew up in a culture that influences them to turn a blind eye to coworkers' wrongdoing, to decide not to get involved, to speak no ill of anyone, to never spread gossip, and to not be informers or snitches.



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Companies want their cultural norm to be: Speak up! Do not tolerate even the smallest ethics problem. The de facto minimum standards for company ethics programs are set by the U.S. Sentencing Guidelines for Organizations.¹ To meet those standards, companies need to detect, investigate, and

Figure 1: Callers' exclusionary process



Callers cross the reporting threshold at various values. Some indicate the threshold for calling to report wrongdoing by a co-worker felt higher than the threshold for calling to ask for expert help on how company ethics policies apply to a decision they are about to make.

Observation

indicates employees typically consider these decision-tree factors before calling the ethics telephone line.

Figure 1 shows an exclusionary process people follow before they reach the threshold to call the ethics hotline/helpline.

Decision 1 is whether the issue is an “emergency” requiring their action. Most issues are not. Professors Bibb Latané and John Darley⁴ determined that people use four steps to make this decision:

1. Notice an event
2. Interpret it as an emergency
3. Accept responsibility
4. Know an appropriate form of assistance

Because the ethics phone line is not a 9-1-1 line, people who decide that an issue is an emergency are instead likely to call the police, fire department, or corporate security.

If people decide an issue is not an emergency requiring their action, Decision 2 is whether it is an issue requiring “whistleblowing,” which is defined as an alert to “authorities” *outside* the company. Again, most issues are not. Building on the Latané and Darley research, professors Marcia Miceli and Janet Near⁵ determined that people use four steps to make that decision:

1. Recognize an issue
2. Assess it as serious
3. Accept responsibility
4. Choose an action

People deciding that an issue requires whistleblowing are likely to call law enforcement, journalists, or lawyers.

If people decide whistleblowing is not required (at the moment), Decision 3 is whether the issue requires an ethics hotline/helpline call inside the company. Review of the content of ethics phone calls suggests callers use four steps to make that decision:

1. They ruminate about what is or could become a bad situation;
2. They create a mental frame explaining that the situation has been or would be created by someone violating a value (usually the value that people should be treated honestly, fairly, and openly) and thus cause social damage, although this may be hard to prove;

fix ethics and compliance problems at the earliest possible time. So, they need employees to quickly report trouble indicators while the problems are small and relatively easy to fix, before they fester into ethics catastrophes.

To borrow a currently popular phrase, companies need to tell employees, “If you see something, say something.”

Companies provide reporting channels (e.g., ethics telephone hotlines/helplines, online messaging, and other methods) that employees or anyone can use to report ethics concerns; and they promise safety, saying no one who reports an issue in good faith need fear they will be punished or become victims of retaliation.

Fear of punishment or retaliation may be common obstacles to reporting, but another is simply that people learn not to tattle as they are growing up. They develop tattling syndrome.

What can a company do to make “see something, say something” happen?

The ethics reporting process

A qualitative study of calls made to the ethics telephone lines of three companies over a two-year period shows people follow a process when deciding whether to raise an ethics question or express an ethics concern.²

The study indicates people are inherently reluctant to call an ethics telephone line and must cross a psychological threshold before they will do so. That threshold has two components:

- ◆ Cognitive—They must know the phone number, and
- ◆ Affective—They must feel a concern deeply, think about it repeatedly, feel anxious about it, perhaps feel worry or anger or lose sleep over it. They *ruminate* about it.

To eliminate any cognitive block, companies widely advertise their ethics telephone number and website.

To eliminate any affective block, companies train employees on corporate values,³ frame the ethics hotline/helpline and online messages as helpful channels or as avenues for prosocial action, assure employees that their reports are wanted and will be acted upon fairly, and promise callers their identity will be protected to the extent possible if they request it.

3. They feel a moral responsibility to somehow confront the issue; and
4. They expect an ethics hotline/helpline call to result in the company solving the problem to benefit other people and themselves.

Overall, the study indicates that occasionally someone will call the ethics phone line for a less-than-noble or even a mean-spirited purpose, but employees generally call because they want to help their company, not hurt it. They want to help make their company a great place to work and sustain its reputation for high ethics.

Psychology author Nick Dubin points out that the difference between undesirable tattling and desirable peer intervention is this: Tattling aims to get someone in trouble, but peer intervention aims to protect people or the company.⁶

Moral reasoning

Research by Professor Lawrence Kohlberg⁷ provides perspective on callers' moral reasoning (i.e., what really is going on in their minds) and suggests what the company can do to improve early reporting.

Kohlberg observed that during childhood people learn "moral reasoning" in six sequential stages:

- ◆ Stage 1 is to "be good" to avoid punishment (e.g., Don't touch a hot stove).
- ◆ Stage 2 is to get a reward (e.g., You will get ice cream if you are good).
- ◆ Stage 3 is to get friends' approval (e.g., Everyone wears green on St. Patrick's Day).
- ◆ Stage 4 is to follow the law/rules (e.g., Don't park at a red curb).
- ◆ Stage 5 is to meet society's expectations (e.g., Wait your turn).
- ◆ Stage 6 is to live up to universal principles (e.g., Honesty is the best policy).

When employees see wrongdoing but say nothing, they are choosing to make their decision at Stage 1, 2, or 3. It's Stage 1 if they fear punishment or retaliation if they speak up. It's Stage 2 if they are complicit in the wrongdoing and seek to share some benefit it offers. It's Stage 3 if they believe friends and other peers will approve silence and disapprove of telling.

What a company can do is educate employees to frame the issue, so they make their decision at Stage 4, 5, or 6. It's Stage 4 if they frame the issue as violation of a law they or their company are expected to obey. It's Stage 5 if they frame the issue as conduct that may not be illegal but is unfair or against the best interests of the company and the community. It's Stage 6 if they frame the issue as conduct that violates "universal principles" (e.g., recognizing that flushing industrial waste into a river kills by poisoning the water).

As Kohlberg pointed out, some employees' moral reasoning may not have matured past Stage 3 (friends' approval), and they will need time and training to progress to the higher stages. Other employees will already have learned to reason at Stage 5 or 6 and quickly recognize the benefit of peer intervention and framing issues at the higher stages.

A company can use that developmental diversity to get all employees trained to use the higher stages. The specific intervention is a recognized ethics training best practice: face-to-face discussion of ethics issues in small groups.⁸

In those discussions, Stage 4, 5 and 6 thinkers can share their views, thus exposing fellow employees to examples to learn from. That can set expectations for fellow employees to aspire to achieve, and thus shape the corporate culture.

Note that Stages 1, 2, and 3 focus on "me" and how the issue and decision affect "me." Stages 4, 5, and 6 focus on "all of us" and how the issue and decision affect many people. The prompts for the face-to-face training discussions should elicit recognition that the issue and decision affect multiple stakeholders in consequential ways.

The outcome is developing a culture in which employees readily intervene to tell a colleague, "This is how we do things around here." This is peer mentoring. Many ethics problems can be entirely prevented if one employee spots impending trouble and intervenes promptly by speaking personally to another employee and teaching them how to recognize and stop the problem.

The rowboats analogy

A rowboats analogy may be helpful to demonstrate the benefit of peer mentoring. The analogy says that if you were in a helicopter hovering high over any corporation—Microsoft, IBM, Exxon—and looked down through an "ethics lens" that displayed the company's business ethics culture, you would see rowboats. Depending on the size of the company, you would see dozens, hundreds, or even thousands of rowboats. Each employee of the company would be rowing their own ethics rowboat.

If everyone in the company (say, 50,000 of us) chooses to row in the same direction, then our paths will be smooth. But if one, two, or three of the 50,000 choose to row in a different direction, then conflicts arise, boats will collide, some may sink, and people may get hurt.

The first people to detect ethics boats that are off course will be employees rowing their own boats nearby, peers within hollering range who can sound the alarm and call for an immediate course correction, before any boats collide. That's mentoring. And that's why one, two, or a few people can save a company from ethics disaster.

How do employees learn to speak up to provide peer mentoring? The best-practice training, face-to-face discussion of ethics issues encourages a corporate culture of open communication. Employees practice discussing ethics problems with each other and their manager in a safe, classroom environment. This opens the door to future safe and timely discussion of new ethics problems in the routine working environment.

The U.S. Sentencing Guidelines for Organizations expect companies to "promote an organizational culture that encourages ethical conduct and a commitment to compliance with the law."⁹ Realistically, any business will constantly encounter a stream of ethics challenges. We know what to do once an ethics problem is detected: investigate, correct the problem, and take action to prevent recurrence of similar problems in the future. We have tools to do that effectively. The constant flow of reports that highlight incidents of corporate bad ethics indicates what needs improvement is our tools to prevent ethics failures.

Kent Kresa, when he was CEO of Northrop Corporation, highlighted this need. He said, "Ethics is not about policing. It is about creating the kind of climate in which people are encouraged to make the right decisions in the first place."¹⁰ As a practical matter, that translates to a corporate culture

encouraging safe, open communication and constant mentoring by wise co-workers and managers. ■

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Endnotes

1. U.S. Sentencing Guidelines Manual § 8B2.1 (Nov. 2004).
2. Frank Daly and Carl Oliver, *Business Ethics: The Path to Certainty* (Pahran, Australia: Tilde University Press, 2013), pp. 120-121.
3. Dawn-Marie Driscoll and W. Michael Hoffman, *Ethics Matters: How to Implement Values-Driven Management* (Waltham, MA: Center for Business Ethics, 2000): pp. 23-34.
4. Bibb Latané and John M. Darley, *The Unresponsive Bystander: Why Doesn't He Help?* (New York, NY: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1970), pp. 31-32.
5. Marcia P. Miceli and Janet P. Near, *Blowing the Whistle: The Organizational and Legal Implications for Companies and Employees* (New York, NY: Lexington, 1992), p. 60.
6. Nick Dubin, *Asperger Syndrome and Bullying: Strategies and Solutions* (Philadelphia, PA: Jessica Kingsley, 2007), p. 69.
7. Kohlberg's Stages of Moral Reasoning, Lumen website, <https://bit.ly/36nAcV8>
8. Warren B. Rudman, Robert P. Parker, Richard S. Elliott, et al, *A Report to the Chairman and Board of Directors of The Boeing Company Concerning the Company's Ethics Program and Its Rules and Procedures for the Treatment of Competitors' Proprietary Information* (2003), p. 123.
9. U.S. Sentencing Guidelines Manual § 8B2.1 (Nov. 2004).
10. Kent Kresa, *A Message from the Chairman and Chief Executive Officer. Standards of Business Conduct* (Century City, CA: Northrop Grumman Corporation, 2001).