



Online Ethics Center
FOR ENGINEERING AND SCIENCE

Whistleblowing Subject Aid

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Description

A short guide to some key resources and readings on the topic of whistleblowing.

Body

Whistleblowing is the act of raising a concern (such as one about safety, financial fraud, or mistreatment of research animals) about the organization in which a problem or suspected problem is occurring. Traditionally those called whistleblowers have or have had affiliations with the organization. Just recently, scandals involving emissions from Volkswagen cars with diesel engines and lead in the Flint, Michigan water supply have involved public notice from individuals who are not affiliated with the organizations involved; their actions would not be seen as whistleblowing in the usual sense but they do expose concerns to public view.

Whistleblowing can occur within an organization by reporting the problem to, for instance, an ombudsman, or it can involve exposing the concerns outside of the affected organization. A whistleblower who works through official internal channels — when they exist and are effective — can help to bring about positive change; not all whistleblowing results in substantial harm to the affected organization. At the same time, not all organizations have effective reporting or response systems, and it

is possible that the simple act of calling attention to a problem can be an embarrassment for an organization. As a result, whistleblowers are not always appreciated or well protected.

Researchers, scientists, and engineers have organizational and professional responsibilities requiring judgment about potential exposures to harms or hazards and action to prevent or mitigate these possibilities. In both the VW and Flint cases, engineers and scientists were involved in contributing to, as well as calling attention to, the violations. If organizations do not address the concerns of their employees, one consideration for those employees, among others, is that of appealing for external assistance. Within academia, scientist and engineering faculty, students, and postdoctoral fellows may also be faced with situations where they suspect that research misconduct, fraud or abuses of other kinds are occurring. They too may turn to external sources for help.

Universities that accept federal funding in the United States are required to have procedures in place for reporting and investigating suspected research misconduct. Many US regulatory agencies, such as the US Occupational Safety and Health Administration and the US Consumer Product Safety Commission, exist to perform oversight and offer anonymous channels for whistleblowers to use. Going to those charged with oversight is usually acknowledged to be much less adversarial than going to an external authority or the media.

Online Ethics Center for Engineering, National Academy of Engineering. 2006.

“Whistle-Blower.” In “Glossary.” Accessed May 26, 2016.

www.onlineethics.org/glossary.aspx.

Subject Overviews

Gunsalus, C.K. 1998. “How to Blow the Whistle and still have a Career Afterwards.” *Science and Engineering Ethics* 4:51-64.

[https://www.researchgate.net/profile/C-](https://www.researchgate.net/profile/C-Gunsalus/publication/40665058_How_to_Blow_the_Whistle_and_Still_Have_a_Career_to-Blow-the-Whistle-and-Still-Have-a-Career-Afterwards.pdf)

[Gunsalus/publication/40665058_How_to_Blow_the_Whistle_and_Still_Have_a_Career_to-Blow-the-Whistle-and-Still-Have-a-Career-Afterwards.pdf](https://www.researchgate.net/profile/C-Gunsalus/publication/40665058_How_to_Blow_the_Whistle_and_Still_Have_a_Career_to-Blow-the-Whistle-and-Still-Have-a-Career-Afterwards.pdf)

Filing charges of research misconduct can be a risky and dangerous endeavor.

This article presents **rules of conduct** to follow when considering whether to

report perceived misconduct, and a **set of step-by-step procedures** for responsible whistleblowing that describe how to do so once the decision to report misconduct has been made. This advice is framed within the university setting, and may not apply fully in industrial settings.

Gunsalus, C.K. 1998. "Preventing the Need for Whistleblowing: Practical Advice for University Administrators." *Science and Engineering Ethics* 4:75-94.

https://business.illinois.edu/gunsalus/gunsalus_pdf/20_Preventing%20the%20Need%20Practical%20Advice%20for%20University%20Administrators.pdf

A thoughtful and well-designed institutional response to a whistleblower starts long before a problem ever arises. Important elements include efforts by the institution's leaders to cultivate an ethical environment, provide clear and fair personnel policies, support internal systems for resolving complaints and grievances, and be willing to address problems when they are revealed. While many institutions have well-developed procedures for handling formal grievances, systems for handling complaints at their earliest stages usually receive less attention. This article focuses on systemic elements necessary for cultivating an ethical environment, good practices in responding to complaints, and the role those practices can play in preventing a confrontation with a whistleblower.

Policy and Guidance

The Office of Research Integrity. 1995. "Handling Misconduct - Whistleblowers." Last modified November 20.

<http://ori.hhs.gov/guidelines-whistleblowers>. Accessed June 23, 2017.

Guidelines from the Office of Research Integrity (ORI), Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS): ORI "strongly believes in the importance of protecting whistleblowers who make good faith allegations of scientific misconduct to ORI or appropriate institutional authorities. In particular, ORI is committed to protecting good faith whistleblowers from retaliation by covered institutions and their members."

Ravishankar, Lilanthi. 2003. "Encouraging Internal Whistleblowing in Organizations." Markkula Center Focus Areas. February 4.

<https://www.scu.edu/ethics/focus-areas/business-ethics/resources/encouraging-internal-whistleblowing/> Accessed June 23, 2017

This article provides a history of changing attitudes and laws concerning whistleblowing in commercial organizations. It identifies ways for businesses to implement successful internal whistleblowing programs to be responsive to increased public demand for ethically acceptable organizational behavior.

Bibliography

Many of the articles listed above contain references. The Online Ethics Center has a bibliography of resources on topics of concern to engineers in the workplace, and one of those topics is whistleblowing. Those references can be found at <https://onlineethics.org/cases/whistleblowing-bibliography>. Accessed 6/14/17. Last updated by Kelly Laas, September 2016.

Dingle, Adrian. 2016. "The Flint Water Crisis: What's Really Going On? ACS ChemMatters Online. December. Accessed June 14, 2017

<https://www.acs.org/content/acs/en/education/resources/highschool/chemmatters/pissues/2016-2017/december-2016/flint-water-crisis.html>

Provides an accessible account of the history of the crisis and the chemistry that underlies the problems and what must be done to prevent, ameliorate, or overcome them.

Ewing, Jack. 2017. *Faster, Higher, Farther - The Volkswagen Scandal*. New York: WW Norton & Company, Inc. ISBN 978-0-393-25450-1.

Volkswagen's corporate culture fostered an environment which required illegal methods to meet the company's commitment to becoming the world's largest automaker. By early 2017 the company had paid over \$20 billion to settle with American regulators and consumers, and additional lawsuits remain.

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Bibliography

Parent Collection

OEC Subject Aids

Topics

Whistleblowing

Discipline(s)

Engineering

Life and Environmental Sciences

Computer, Math, and Physical Sciences

Social and Behavioral Sciences

Research Ethics

Authoring Institution

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