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Speaking up is an emotional process

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What does it feel like to raise a concern, or call the Speak Up line (also called a helpline or hotline), or be a witness in an investigation of misconduct in the workplace?

Speaking up is an emotional process. For corporate procedures to be effective, this needs to be acknowledged. In whatever country you operate, the law is imperfect and only goes so far to encourage and protect those who speak up, so it is up to ethics and compliance professionals to understand and empathize with the emotional complexities faced by someone who raises concerns, even within a supportive environment.

The fear of reporting

I have spoken up at work, raising a concern about a bullying senior manager. My colleagues were too afraid to—fearful of the consequences and painfully aware that it had been done before, with seemingly no action taken. Instead, they warned against it. “If you report it, your life will be hell” was the message. Those fears are all too real for the 43% of employees who have witnessed misconduct but didn’t raise their concerns, according to the Institute of Business Ethics (IBE) Ethics at Work survey of employees.^[1] According to the IBE’s survey, more than 27% of European employees fear that speaking up would jeopardize their jobs, 26% didn’t believe that any corrective action would be taken, and 26% worried that speaking up would alienate them from colleagues.

As the manager’s bullying behavior escalated, people left or were signed off sick, but still no one would speak up. No one wanted to be “the one.” They were scared of the potential retaliation, despite our organization having a non-retaliation policy. Calling the Speak Up line felt intimidating and serious, but when I eventually did, I felt an enormous sense of relief. My expectations were considerable, but I had no one to share them with. At first I felt exhilarated; it was empowering to take action. But as the days went past with nothing more than the original acknowledgement of my call, paranoia began to set in. Once an investigation was underway, although I was well supported by the senior leader who was managing the case, I felt isolated and alone within my team. Rumors began to fly about the manager being reported, and my colleagues speculated about who had made the report and what the outcome would be.

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