A matter of facts

Professor Chris Cowton, Associate Director at the Institute of Business Ethics, explores how to overcome two barriers to speaking up - fear and futility

A well-designed speak up system is a great tool. For organisations, it provides opportunities to find out what is not working well, perhaps nipping a problem in the bud before it becomes a crisis. For individuals, it provides the chance to have their voice heard, to raise their concerns in a protected environment. In principle.

However, to move from speak up system availability to an active speak up culture involves overcoming some impediments. Our research backs up what others have noted before: that 2Fs get in the way, namely, fear and futility.

First, fear. The Institute of Business Ethics' Ethics at Work survey of 10,000 employees across 13 countries showed that the most common reason for people not to report misconduct they had witnessed was fear of retaliation. Such retaliation can take many forms, such as being passed over for promotion or alienated by colleagues. That is why it is so important for senior leadership to be consistent in their message that retaliation against someone for speaking up will not be tolerated.

However, even if employees are reasonably reassured about protection from retaliation, there is the second F to address: namely futility, or a lack of belief that corrective action will be undertaken if a speak up report is made. Our Ethics at Work survey showed that this was a major barrier. Why bother going to the trouble of reporting misconduct if you don't think anything will be done about it?

One of the challenges in dealing with a perception of futility is that, when someone does actually make a report, they can be disappointed with the feedback they receive. It's therefore important to manage their expectations of what they will hear about the progress of the case and the eventual outcome – especially given that, for good HR or legal reasons, it's often not possible to provide detailed information about what happened as a result of the investigation. Providing thanks for the report and reassurance that an investigation took place, whether or not the allegation (if that is what it was) was upheld, is often the best that can be done – although, returning to our first F, following up to ensure that no retaliation has been experienced is also important.

However, there is another way to tackle a general perception of futility, which is to publish – internally or even externally – aggregate data about the outcome of reports to the speak up system. Here's an example from the 2021 Sustainability Report of the US defence company, Northrop Grumman:

2021 ACTIONS TAKEN AS A RESULT OF INVESTIGATIONS SUBSTANTIATED IN WHOLE OR IN PART

Coaching or Counseling	172
Terminations	130
Memo of Expectations	90
Written Warning	88
Verbal Warning	8
Suspension & Demotion	4
TOTAL	**492**

A report like Northrop Grumman's shows there are real consequences as a result of the reports made, which will build belief and trust in the system. To introduce our third F-word: facts can be used to counter perceptions of futility. And such facts are available to everyone, whether or not they have previously considered using the speak up system.

Now, not all organisations are of the scale of Northrop Grumman, with its employee numbers in the region of six figures. If you're a relatively small organisation, or a larger organisation that is still trying to build its speak up culture, it can be difficult to provide systematic data that doesn't risk breaching confidentiality. However, you don't need to provide the same detailed categories; you can employ broader headings. Another idea is to amalgamate the data for a number of years. For example, you could report annually updated figures for, say, a 3- or 5-year window.

The important thing is that you seek to counter unwarranted perceptions of futility with concrete information. Or, to put it another way, let the facts speak (up) for themselves.