WHISTLE-BLOWER: A High-Risk Position

By Lindsey Novak
Tribune Media

Some of the letters I get are from people who just want to do their jobs and be left alone; others are from those who want to go the extra mile to perform, and still others are from those who are willing to put their jobs on the line because of moral issues.

Whistle-blowing is risky. You may feel as if you have no choice if you are going to be able to sleep at night, but be assured that when you report your boss or your company for unethical activity, you're going to experience repercussions.

One reader discovered this the hard way. He worked at a research organization for more than 20 years. "I was responsible for the safety of technicians who installed equipment in a new particle accelerator funded by the U.S. Department of Energy," he wrote. He discovered that his technicians were working in an enviornment that did not meet the company's and DOE safety standards. In fact, the decreased safety standards could cause potentially fatal radiation exposure to them.

As a responsible and ethical supervisor, he reported his safety concerns to management. After waiting one month and getting no response, he reported the situation again. "For the next two and a half years, I continued to try to get the safety deficiecies resolved." Management made repeated promises but took no action. Except for one.

Management threatened to fire him, and did so several months later on what he described as trumped up charges. He then discovered through a government agency that there was another whistle-blower at the company - who also became a victim of company retaliation.

Another reader filed a report against her company, and she too, was fired. She says, "I should have been warned that companies do retaliate. I was with (my) company for 30 years."

The moral of these stories is that whistle-blowing is a risk. Act as you see fit, but don't fool yourself into thinking that just because you may be protecting lives, you'll be thanked. When you blow the whistle on your boss, you're attacking his livelihood. If he's exposed and found guilty, he may not get another job at that level. When you report your company for wrongful practices, you're threatening its bottom line, and to some executives, losing money is as life-threatening as losing blood.

ABSENTEE BOSS HOLDS BACK COMPANY'S PROGRESS

Q: I'm a product development manager or a medium-sized company with several locations in the Midwest. I usually have eight product developers working for me. I reported to the vice president of development, until one day, by e-mail, I was notified that I should now report to the director of marketing and sales. One month later, my new boss was assigned to develop the European market and I have not seen him in five months.

Three of my developers quit in disgust and two others will soon be taking maternity leave. I asked my boss for additional staffing, but he referred me to our human resources department. That department is the company joke, as it is comprised of three people who were promoted from the mail room 10 years ago - they have yet to interview one person.

I have always gotten the product out on time and under budget, but I'm up to my neck in overdue orders and can't get the staff I need. I'm worried about the negative impact this will have on my career. This mess is also affecting my mental and physical well-being. Is there solution or should I, too, quit?

A: Since your boss avoided his responsibilities, write him a formal, detailed memo regarding your staffing problems and overdue orders, and offer a concrete solution with a proposed deadline. Also inform him of human resources" inability to act, without insulting them.

Hopefully, your boss will see that without product and satisfied customers, the company may no longer need him to work on the European market. you also should start a job search regardless of the outcome.

Having problems on the job? Write to Lindsey Novak in care of Tribute Media Services, Inc., 435 N. Michigan Ave., Suite 1500, Chicago, Ill. 60611. She can also be contacted at AtWorkbyLN@AOL.com

Where To Find PC Technical Support

By Alice Bredin,
Tribune Media

I have had two problems with my home office PC for the last few years. Although they are annoying, I have put up with them because I haven't had time to resolve them. One is vertical lines that run through the screen of my portable PC, the other is that the mouse on my portable sticks.

As I mentioned last week, I have a trusted PC technician, Matt, who comes to my home office to handle most of my hardware and software needs. These problems, however, are not within his area of expertise. Because the problems only bother me when I travel (my docking station has a monitor and mouse that work perfectly) I have let them go rather than have them fixed.

Another reason I never had the problems tended to is that I don't know where to turn. My warranty has expired; I am not getting anywhere with the vendor.

In preparation for having my assistant find someone to fix my problems while I am on vacation. I researched the options. I listed some of them - on-line services, news-groups and PC user groups - in last week's column; here are some others:

-Diagnostic software. Diagnostic software is my assistant Carol's first stop in her quest to have my PC fixed by the time I return from Spain. Utility software like Norton Utilities (Symantec Corp., (800) 441-7234) and Cybermedia's First Aid 97, (310) 518-4700, search your PC for problems and provide a report that lets you know what is wrong. Diagnostic software cannot resolve all PC problems, but it can identify them, which will make them easier to fix.

-On-line diagnostic software. A similar service can be accessed on-line through TuneUp.com (www.tuneup.com), an on-line service that uses Symantec's Norton utilities and anti-virus software. you can also access TuneUp's technical staff at the site.

-TouchStone Software's e.Support (www.esupport.com, (800) 531-0450). On this site, you are promoted to fill out a form that provides technicians with enough information to diagnose your computer problem. The information on the form and details of your computer configuration are e-mailed to the vendor of your PC. Support technicians can them analyze your information and respond to your request via e-mail. The only catch is if your vendor does not subscribe to Touchstone's service, you are likely to get an abbreviated answer, if any.

-HealthyPC.com (www.healthypc.com) doesn't diagnose, but it does provide resources. This subscription-based technical support service provides advice columns, downloadable software utilities, bug fixes, automatic upgrades from a variety of vendors and data back-up services. The first month is free; it's $4.95 a month thereafter.

-SupportHelp.com (www.Supporthelp.com) also doesn't diagnose, but it provides resources to help you find a company that will. It lists Web locations, e-mail addresses, telephone support lines and other contact information for more than 2,600 technology-based companies.

Of course, just because I have not had luck with my vendor, doesn't mean you shouldn't try yours. Compaq (www.compaq.com) and Packard Bell (www.packardbell.com), let you send e-mail directly to technical staff.

Hewlett-Packard, (800) 752-0900, provides a toll-free number for support for small business people for a year after purchase of the Vectra 500 PC. Compaq, (800) 345-1518, charges $35 per event (or $2 per minute) for phone support, although the charge isn't posted if the PC is on warranty. Dell, (800) 879-3355, offers free telephone support for the life of their PC, and IBM, (800) 426-2468), offers a variety of support depending on the PC you own.

Alice Bredin is author of the "Virtual Office Survival handbook" (John Wiley & Sons) and host of The American Express Small Business Exchange Web site http://www.americanexpress.com/smallbusiness. You can write to her at Tribune Media Services, 435 N. Michigan Ave., Chicago, Ill. 60611, or e-mail her at BredinA@aol.com

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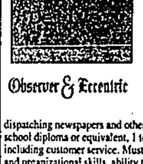

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