



Avoiding a culture of silence

- **To avoid a culture of silence, organizations must encourage openness and honesty.**
- **Open information exchange allows employees to discuss and resolve issues.**

As the background of any scandal unfolds, it is often clear that people knew about the fraud as it was occurring, or at least suspected something was wrong. Why did they choose to look the other way, rather than report what they knew or take a stand? It appears that, in many cases, those in positions of authority created and encouraged a culture of silence. In a culture of silence, employees keep quiet out of fear or are ignored or silenced by management. In many of these cases, if the organization had encouraged a culture of open communication, employees would have felt more comfortable voicing their concerns and the fraud may have been detected and stopped much sooner.

An organization with a strong control culture promotes open and honest communication at all levels. Everyone feels safe raising issues and is confident that issues will get prompt, full, and fair consideration. Agency leadership encourages all employees to act ethically, treats everyone fairly, and appreciates all feedback and communication, whether positive or negative. An atmosphere of openness also requires swift and fair discipline for individuals found guilty of wrongdoing.

The keys to avoiding a culture of silence are:

Exhibit an ethical tone at the top The organization must promote open communication and an open-door policy. Managers engage in open and honest communication regarding goals, roles, expectations, and priorities. Management takes responsibility, makes difficult decisions, is transparent about organizational performance, keeps promises, makes decisions openly, and communicates results. The best way to create trust and openness is for management to lead by example and for employees to learn from that example.

Commit publicly Management talks about the

commitment to open communication and ethical behavior regularly through memos, newsletters, and conversations with employees. Employees understand their agency's code of conduct and code of ethics policies, and certify to that understanding annually. Management recognizes and thanks employees who raise ethical issues or internal control concerns.

Investigate and follow-up Inaction by management is the best way to create doubt and cynicism about the level of commitment an organization has to fostering open communication and an ethical environment. As a result, designated agency personnel investigate all allegations promptly and thoroughly, and report the results to senior leaders.

Evaluate the culture An effective way to gauge the organization's communication culture is to openly talk about the organization's commitment to ethics and values. Ask what is going right, what is going wrong, and what makes employees uncomfortable in their jobs. These questions help to identify potential pitfalls before larger problems occur.

Suggested action steps: Do employees feel that management values and encourages communication about issues? Does communication flow up, down, and across the agency? What steps could be taken to encourage open communication in your area?

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