

Ethics: Ask the Expert

Q: What is the difference between disloyalty and whistle blowing, and how are they related?

This question is answered by Frank Navran, principal consultant, Ethics Resource Center, Washington, D.C. (<http://www.ethics.org/>).

A: Loyalty versus whistle blowing represents a classic example of competing values. Competing values are the basis of ethical dilemmas—choices between competing “rights,” as opposed to right-versus-wrong choices.

Some classic dilemmas used for teaching ethical reasoning include: “Is it ethical to steal a loaf of bread to feed a starving child?” and “If (in 1944 Europe) the Nazis had come to your door and asked if you were harboring Jews in your home, would it have been ethical to lie?” The value of these examples is that the most obvious answers might not always be the best “right” choices. What is called for is a review of the facts and a thoughtful determination of the consequences of each possible alternative course of action.

Loyalty is a strong value in our society. In the case of whistle blowing, we often focus on loyalty to a fellow employee. But there also is the question of loyalty to the company, and this is further compounded by the apparent erosion both of employee loyalty to employers and of employer loyalty to employees—an erosion seen, for instance, in massive layoffs of the past 20 years and the shifting notion of lifetime employment in every sector of our society. Loyalty is nonetheless seen as a positive, a good thing to demonstrate.

Whistle blowing, on the other hand, has a less positive connotation in our experience. We don’t have positive word images of people who engage in this activity. In fact, we have mixed messages. On the one hand, we demean “rats, finks, tattletales, snitches, informants,” and the like. The other reality is that we have responsibilities to others, which sometimes require us to “tell.”

In the extreme case, it could be argued that it was loyalty winning out over whistle blowing that could be blamed, in part, for disasters such as Columbine, where peer pressure stressing loyalty kept students from expressing their concerns to the authorities. And look at the suffering resulting from the debacles at Enron, WorldCom, and so on.

On a practical level, most employers have a reasonable expectation that, when an employee is in possession of information about a potential threat to the well-being of the organization—its employees or interests—the employee has an affirmative responsibility to bring that information forward. This often is detailed in employee codes of conduct and supported by the creation of special helpline/hotline functions to receive warning calls while protecting the identity of the caller.

The position I take is that, barring extenuating circumstances, employees have an affirmative obligation to their employers to act in ways that serve the employers' legitimate (and legal) interests, including the reporting of actions by fellow employees (up to and including the board of directors) that act against those interests and/or the public good. Loyalty to a friend should not come into the equation because no true "friend" would put you in a position where you had to choose between doing what is right and protecting your friend from the consequences of doing something they should not have done in the first place.

For an excellent treatise on the subject of right-versus-right decision making, I recommend "Defining Moments" by Joseph L. Badaracco, Jr. You may also wish to read "Whistle Blowing: The Mixed Message" by Frank Navran, which was published in the Spring 2002 issue of *Ethics Today*.

Adapted from the Ethics Resource Center's online newsletter, Ethics Today (www.ethics.org/today). Copyright 2002. All rights reserved.