Fostering a Speak-Up Culture

By Andrea Ihara

Approximately 125 million Americans currently hold full-time jobs. Each of these employees should be able to trust their organizational leaders to make decisions based on their best interest. Likewise, employers should wholeheartedly view their people as the organization's greatest assets.

Unfortunately, a major concern exists where 40 percent or more employees have witnessed misconduct in the workplace. A growing need exists to provide a safe, secure, trusted and well-communicated system for reporting organizational concerns.

Most employees who choose not to speak up do so in fear of retaliation or because of the assumption that nothing will be done to view or remediate the problem. Ask yourself this question: "If I saw one of the shining stars of my organization doing something clearly out of line with company policy, and I reported it – am I confident that senior management would research and act?" Most people will tell you that there are people in many organizations who are viewed as "bullet-proof." Much like the mortgage banking crisis where statements were made that some of the banks in question were too big to fail. Often, long term employees can also be viewed as untouchable.

Many open-door conversations are handled on the spot. Attentive managers talk to their employees, get the facts, determine if there is additional action needed, and mark it as handled. More than one conversation I have witnessed was held over a beer after work, and everyone left feeling complete.

- » What if these situations were just the tip of a much larger iceberg?

- » What if the implicated party had done, whatever it was, many times, involving many other people – and none of them thought it was a big enough deal to carry it forward?

- » What if there is one department, location or person in the organization who is causing trouble and the critical information stays hidden?

- » Maybe corporate management never gains the awareness they need to protect the company from litigation or employee resignation?

- » What if the employee feels marginalized and turns their angst over to social media in order to be heard? Believe it or not, this happens regularly.

- » What are you doing in your organization to prevent this from happening, and to give your employees a voice?

Implementing an anonymous hotline and incident management system for gathering all reported cases is the easy part! Providing training on the solution, generating employee awareness on reporting policies, and providing regular refreshers to keep this information top of mind for all employees is vital to the successful rollout and continued support of a compliance program. Much like annual CPR training, you will not know what to do in an emergency unless the training has been heard often enough to allow for instant recall.

Fostering a "speak-up culture" where employees feel heard, valued and validated will provide both financial and intrinsic benefits; employee retention, corporate oversight and awareness, strong culture and reputation, and ease of recruiting are just a few of the benefits you will experience. Check it out!