

A Whistleblower's Tale

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Retired for several years after spending four decades in the addiction field as a clinician and academic.

I'm a whistleblower, and I am sad to say, I did it on several occasions. I wish to re-count just one of those experiences, and share the course of my thoughts back then, and my thoughts now. While that particular outcome was positive, the personal feeling at the time was sharp and lingers to this day.

I am acutely aware that over time, in this case decades, memories tend to become less than dependable. So, this story rendition has memory errors, as does the narrative I use to explain it.

The Episode

I was a clinical director for a traditional residential treatment program of the time. The administrative set-up was that I had one administrator to which I was accountable. And, there was one overall owner of the entire program. The administrator and I would conduct a daily morning meeting in which I shared clinical issues of the program, and the administrator would discuss administrative issues, mostly money problems, and policy and procedures.

Nothing remarkable occurred in that program for a little over a year. But, as clinical director I was privy to a number of personal staff problems and issues. Some wanted to share private issues. I would listen, and sometimes offered clarity or suggestions. It went with the job. Then something distinctive began to occur. One day someone knocked on the door, stuck their head in my office and stated something to the effect, "Can I talk to you?" "Sure, come in."

The first disclosure of something being amiss within this program was preceded with a fair amount of hesitation on the part of the individual, followed by tears, and dare I say dread. Suffice to

say the staff member disclosed she was having an affair with the administrator to whom I reported every day. I was a bit stunned, and at first opted not to say anything. My head was spinning as to what to do. Then came a second staff member, and a third, and even a student intern.

As I pondered all this, it was clear these individuals were having a difficult time doing their job. They were under a fair amount of duress. They all felt that if they said anything their job would be in jeopardy, not to mention the anguish and fear of what might happen if this became public. To a person, they berated themselves for allowing this to occur. They all wanted out of this mess, but felt a power differential when they brought up that option with the administrator.

Then as now I knew this was ethically wrong and needed to be set right. Summoning the courage, I confronted the administrator, and true to form I was met with denial, and a hefty dose of anger and outrage directed at me. I was accused of being disloyal and threatened with a demotion. Needless to say, the friction between us was intense, and was beginning to interfere with my work. I finally confronted the overall owner of this program thinking there would be a resolution. In my mind, the wrong would be righted. I did not, however, get the support I thought was due, and with no resolve on the horizon was encouraged to simply take the demotion. In the end, I was fired.

Being unemployed with two kids is not a good place to be. It was the consequence of my being a whistleblower. However, the single bright spot occurred a few weeks later when I received a phone call from the owner's representative telling me the administrator was fired and the program wanted me back. I politely declined.

Over the years, I've thought about this episode and its impact on my professional life. In the short run, I soon secured another job as clinical director at a nearby residential program. I was fortunate. In the long run, my career was not endangered in any way. I have reframed this episode as one that made me feel resilient and professionally savvy. I would like to feel I endured some intense periods of anguish and came out better at the other end.

I still feel an especial satisfaction in knowing that I righted a wrong and used my ethical values of the time. The staff who initially approached me later thanked me for my efforts, yet felt guilty that I was no longer at the treatment program, and they were somehow to blame. They were not.

One last residual thought about those painful days was a deep feeling that I could not have

let the wrong to which I was privy pass and do nothing. That option did not sit well then or now. But, that's just me.

Being caught between the jaws of staying silent or doing something is just an awful state. And while I wish not to disparage the fine work of the other authors in this special edition, their theorizing, and even mine, do not quite touch or completely comfort the stress of those crushing jaws. The point being, the acute emotions of whistleblowing weigh heavily in making this kind of a decision.

Post Analysis

Today, my rational examination about this episode, especially after writing an ethics book (Taleff, 2010), goes something like this. First, it is difficult to separate whistleblowing from ethics especially if harm has ensued. Second, it seemed without a strong formal knowledge of ethics at the time, I did employ an internal set of ethical principles. After publishing a book on ethics, I can articulate those principles a bit better.

As most readers know there are (arguably) four classical foundations by which we judge ethical behavior: divine command (assess according to sacred texts), deontology (do your duty), utilitarianism (assess based on best outcomes), and virtue ethics (act according to the finest moral character).

In my case, divine command did not play a significant role. However, it seems I may have utilized some confluence of the other three standards. Again, note that this account might well have been created as a narrative favorable to me. With that caveat, I would like to believe I acted out the duty to right a wrong. When the administrator left, it was clear that the overwhelming number of people at that treatment center were happier. It was, if not the best outcome, a damn good one. Finally, of the several classical virtues from which I would like to think I acted, I proceeded from positions of courage, justice, and good temperament. And yes, they wavered at times.

Whistleblowing is never pleasant (what an understatement). These days there seems to be a bit more body and direction to address whistleblowing. The ideas presented in this special edition circumscribe such a movement.

Hopefully, it provides food for thought and practical guidance should you ever face such a situation.

Reference

Taleff, M. J., *Advanced Ethics for Addiction Professionals*. New York: Springer. 2010

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