

# BLOW WHISTLE BLOW

**Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong's call in January to encourage whistle blowing has put nonprofits and VWOs in the spotlight again. Looking at the issues, IMELDA LEE asks: Are Singaporeans ready for a whistle blowing culture?**

**T**he besieged social service sector was spotlighted again recently after Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong encouraged Singaporeans to blow the whistle on nonprofit organisations (NPOs) suspected of inappropriate practices. The call came hot on the heels of the National Kidney Foundation (NKF) saga, and the Singapore Anti-Tuberculosis Association (SATA) debacle.

Shortly after PM Lee's call, the National Council of Social Service (NCSS) made a further suggestion for the social service sector to put in place a whistle blower policy to encourage staff to speak

up without fear of reprisal. As far back as early 2004, parliamentarians had called for a whistle blowing policy but the government felt Singaporeans were not ready for the move. Is now the right time?

## Views From the Top

Views from heads of NPOs and volunteer welfare organisations (VWOs) were as diverse as the services they provide. True to the subject matter, many who were approached to comment for this story insisted on remaining anonymous or preferred not to use their real names.

A VWO head who declined to be

identified thinks the call for a whistle blowing policy is an over-reaction to the NKF saga and "undermines the long established trust of our volunteer driven VWO sector."

He adds, "Any whistle blowing policy is an open platform for mistrust. Such a policy, being negatively inclined by itself, will cause people to be more guarded, and not necessarily more honest. This is especially so when you are only addressing issues that concern the minority... why should the majority be affected by it?"

Ivy Singh-Lim, the outspoken president of Asian Netball Federation and president of the Kranji Countryside Association, says, "As long as we have a culture where people have no courage and are continuously discouraged from speaking up, we will never be a nation of warriors. I hate the term 'whistle blowing'. If we need to put in place such a policy, then we're just a nation of cowards."

She also cautions against encouraging a culture of whistle blowers. "It would be like living in the old Communist days



when you don't know who is going to squeal on you. We should bring back the basic values of honesty, integrity, and courage in our people so that they will speak up when they have to."

Comments June, a Singaporean who does regional work for an international NPO, "When it comes to whistle blowing that leads to mass public furor and involves huge lawsuits and major investigations, our society in general is not ready to embrace the practice."

Mak Yuen Teen, vice-chairman of SATA and a lecturer on corporate governance at the National University of Singapore, observes, "Overall, I think there are still few Singaporeans who are willing to blow the whistle on wrongdoing, unless there is little chance of their identity becoming known."

Lecturer Ana says, "The term 'whistle blower' does not have a positive connotation. I think whistle blowing is similar to snitching and no one wants to be known as a snitcher. Our culture also does not promote washing dirty linen in

public, which whistle blowing implies." She thinks the culture Singaporeans are looking for is one of accountability for public monies instead.

Three things innate in our culture will prevent whistle blowing from taking off, suggests another anonymous interviewee. "One, our attitude towards our leaders says, 'They are the authority, they know what they are doing'. Two, 'This has nothing to do with me, why should I bother?' And three: 'Why put my neck on the line? I have to protect my rice bowl.'"

### Reality Bites

Ana blew the whistle on her former employer, a VWO.

"I decided that what I saw was truly bad management, and that the clients were not benefiting from what was happening. I had to decide that it was not spitefulness, and even had to look at the impact of it being possibly seen as snitching or washing dirty linen in public."

After considering all that, she decided to tell the headquarters of the VWO, but only after submitting her resignation. "If I had decided not to leave, I would not have gone all the way to talk about accountability. I knew that if I did and stayed, it would have been a living hell, not just for me, but also for the people under my supervision. Their promotion and job scopes would have been limited."

The head office took action by "pacifying" the person in question, and by offering a very good departure package instead of firing the person with no benefits. "It amazed me how they could do that. I am happy they managed to get the person out of the position of power; however, I still feel it was not done correctly," she recalls.

Too much is at stake for whistle blowers to want to stick their necks out, even for a worthy cause, as in Ana's case.

In the United Kingdom, legal protection is mandated to safeguard whistle blowers from being victimized or dismissed. In the United States, legislation on whistle blowing enables staff to raise concerns about wrongful practices safely and as an alternative to keeping mum.

Yet, a US survey revealed that too many brickbats are stacked up against

whistle blowers. According to a Today Online report in January this year, 54 per cent of these whistle blowers in the US were harassed by colleagues; 90 per cent suffered from depression and anxiety, and one in 10 attempted suicide. Almost every one of them was fired and encountered problems finding another job.

"There are many ways to skin the cat. By that, I mean there are many ways to punish whistle blowers. Whistle blowers will probably be ostracised in any organisation unless there is a major re-organisation, and this applies globally," notes Yong Teck Meng, chairman of Habitat for Humanity (Singapore).

Whistle blowing breeds distrust in an organisation, adds Yong. "In an NPO, there will be many areas that may cause misunderstanding, more so than in a profit-and-loss organisation. NPOs need to base their operations on a lot of faith and good will – it is a business linked with idealism. To encourage whistle blowing is to create an atmosphere of mistrust from the start – as in why have whistle blowing when everybody came together to do good in the first place? – and then to encourage them to look for perceived wrongdoings where there may possibly be none."



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**IVY SINGH-LIM, president of Asian Netball Association, cautioning against encouraging a whistle blowing culture in Singapore**



Further, the fear of gaining a reputation as a whistle blower among potential employers could impair one's career development prospects or in the worst case scenario, totally destroy one's rice bowl. That is a big factor in influencing one's decision not to blow the whistle.

States June, "A whistle blower is

likely be isolated by fellow colleagues and management, which may ultimately lead to depression and anxiety, and in extreme cases, suicide. There are repercussions on families and loved ones.”

“Engaging a lawyer to defend one’s case is also extremely costly, time consuming and can drain you financially, physically, emotionally and mentally. The implications and impact that whistle blowing can have on the lives of the individuals, their families and loved ones is too great to risk to undertake without assurances of continual normalcy and protection,” she adds.

Comments SATA’s Mak, “When employees whistle blow, there is a greater risk of their identity being discovered, especially if they reveal information which may only be known to a few individuals within the organisation.

“Currently, employees who are faced with wrongdoing within organisations are more likely to either stay silent or resign without saying anything. Not only do they fear being ostracised within the organisation, they also fear being ostracised within the close-knit business community, which unfortunately still tends to view whistle blowers as trouble-makers and disloyal employees. Our existing libel laws and our very pro-employer employment laws are also real impediments towards encouraging employees to whistle blow.”

Felicia Chia, formerly in the broad-



**There is actually a name for open whistle blowing without consequences – it’s called ‘feedback’.**

**YONG TECK MENG, chairman, Habitat for Humanity (Singapore)**



cast media, saw anomalies in a previous company and did nothing about it.

“I didn’t think it would do a bit of good. I don’t think having any other policies specially to protect whistle blowers will really help encourage more people to step forward. The issue is not so much that I’m afraid for my own job, since I believe that it’s more important to do the right thing at the right time.

“What makes the difference in whether or not I blow the whistle is if it would really result in positive action being taken. Most of the time, my ex-colleagues and I felt it would’ve been useless to voice up and then worse, with no positive change forthcoming, we’d get in trouble for all our efforts.”

### **What It Takes**

While legislation protecting whistle blowers will be a great help, having a proper whistle

blowing policy and a culture within an organisation that encourages employees to speak up is also important, clarifies Mak.

“If an organisation has a culture of openness and transparency and a tolerance for alternative views, then a whistle blowing policy is much more likely to be effective. The values of people at the top of the organisation – the board, controlling shareholders, CEO – will either encourage it or discourage it, depending on those values.”

“There is actually a name for open whistle blowing without consequences – it’s called ‘feedback,’” says Habitat’s Yong. “My people talk to me all the time about their concerns, and I pro-actively seek them out to hear them out as well. The safeguard measurements for the organisation cannot come from whistle blowing alone.”

The correct safeguard for any organisation is having in place proper corporate governance systems and tools, like board diligence, third party financial audits, and even conflict of interest avoidance. “The problem we have today is not the lack of whistle blowers, but the lack of simple integrity and the neglect of simple responsibility,” he suggests.

So are we ready to embrace a whistle blowing culture? The answer, it seems, is neither a resounding ‘Yes!’ nor ‘No!’ As Jennifer Yee, executive director of Lions Befrienders Service Association sums it up, “It is not whether Singapore is ready or not. There can be regulations set to say the whistle blower in the organisation cannot be penalised. But even with all the protective regulations set in place, it all boils down to an individual’s courage, financial situation, and values as to whether he or she will blow the whistle or not.” ☆



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**FELICIA CHIA, who chose to remain silent about anomalies in her former company**

