How to Introduce an Ethics Hotline

By Rod Lacey, MySilentWhistle / Sunstone HR

According to multiple fraud studies conducted by the ACFE, the most effective method for reducing

workplace fraud is the application of an ethics hotline. Hotlines allow and encourage employees, customers and others to report corruption and wrongdoing. Tips received through hotlines are the most common way fraud is uncovered, and the promise of anonymity is an important ingredient in opening the doors for information flow as wide as they should be.

So, it definitely makes sense to have a third-party compliance hotline. If you don't have one, you should get one. (If you're wondering where to start, check-out MySilentWhistle)

Rolling out a whistleblower program should be presented in the right way, however, if the organization hopes to get the most out of the new tool.

Whistleblowing has had a bit of a reputation of being a "snitch" behavior, but recent publicity has significantly opened these doors and these individuals are now regarded as being brave, or noble. It is easier to present a tool like this to an employee group than ever before.

Keep the Message Simple
When announcing your hotline, begin by sharing the very simple nature of the tool. This is a tool to empower employees to identify wrongdoing and to protect the integrity of the company. Emphasize that all good companies offer a tool like this.

Be sure to share some examples of what might warrant calling the number or submitting a confidential form. Some employees may use the anonymity of a program like this to take shots at a coworker or manager, in an anonymous attempt to get them in trouble.

Commit to No Retaliation
Supported by internal policies, it is important to clarify that legitimate claims, filed through a third-party whistleblower tool, will not be subject to retaliation. Certain reporting is protected by state or federal statutes, so it is important to make sure that a Code of Conduct or Ethics policy fully defines the non-retaliation parameters for each organization.

Guarantee Confidentiality
The confidentiality of a hotline is what encourages many to ultimately make their report, especially when the stakes are high. Make sure that the employees fully understand that a third-party is running the service, and that they are under contract to not share any personal information.

Support from The Top
Don't just include the senior leadership team in the decision-making process, have them pledge their commitment to the integrity of the organization and the use of this tool. Don't make this an auditing or HR program - it needs greater emphasis than that.

Publicize It. Remind Employees Regularly
Beyond the onboarding process where hundreds of new items are shared with overwhelmed, new employees, your employees should be reminded of this tool in meetings, on the company's intranet site, and even in posters in break rooms.

Sadly, several recent victims of inappropriate behavior reported they were unaware that their organizations even offered hotlines. These organizations and executives are now being tried in the 'court of public opinion', rather than having their information shared first internally.

Summary

Protect Your Employees. Protect Your Company. Protect Your Bottom-Line.

When you roll-out a compliance or ethics hotline, make the most of it! Make it accessible and remind the employees regularly of its importance. It is far better to have an opportunity to address matters internally than to have them announced to the public.

Doors for reporting bad behavior have swung wider than ever before, so if your organization doesn't have a compliance hotline, it's time to consider one.

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