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Whistleblower Well-Being as a Foundation for Sustainable Workplaces¹



Anniken Grønstad, Associate Professor, Oslo New University College

Sustainable working life has become an increasingly prominent concern in both policy and organizational practice. It is often framed through the UN's Sustainable Development Goals, particularly Goal 3 (good health and well-being) and Goal 8 (decent work and economic growth). Together, these goals highlight that employee well-being and ethical working conditions are not peripheral ideals, but fundamental prerequisites for resilient organizations and sustainable societies.

At the organizational level, sustainable working life can be understood as a renewed commitment to securing good working conditions and a healthy work environment through fact-based, preventive measures. From this perspective, sustainability is not only a societal ambition but also a practical responsibility embedded in everyday management and Human Resources (HR) practices. Whistleblowing represents a core component of such preventive work. When employees speak up about wrongdoing, organizations gain the opportunity to address harmful practices early, before they escalate into crises that undermine individuals, workplaces, and public trust. Research consistently shows that whistleblowing is one of the most effective mechanisms for detecting wrongdoing in organizations; more effective than audits, inspections, and control systems combined, and it is also cost-efficient (ACFE, 2018; Kenny & Fotaki, 2021; Spagnalo & Foyn, 2017; Van Portfliet, Irfan & Kenny, 2022). Yet despite its documented value, most employees who observe wrongdoing remain silent. Among those who do speak up, many experience serious negative consequences.

These outcomes make clear that whistleblowing cannot be understood solely as a legal or compliance matter. It is fundamentally a work environment and human resource issue. How organizations respond to whistleblowing directly affects employee well-being, organizational culture, and the long-term sustainability of work itself.

¹ Note: this text is based on Grønstad, A., Blenkinsopp, J. & Bjørkelo, B. (2025). Whistleblower Well-Being: What Are the Roles and Responsibilities of HR? In: Phillips, A. & Van Portfliet, M. (eds.) *Whistleblowing Policy and Practice, Volume I*. Palgrave Macmillan, Cham.

The Human Cost of Courage

This tension captures what is often described as the paradox of whistleblowing: actions that can safeguard organizations and society often come at a significant personal cost to those who raise the concern. Speaking up is an act of courage, yet employees who blow the whistle may face retaliation, exclusion, stigmatization, and prolonged conflict. Research consistently documents elevated risks of anxiety, depression, post-traumatic stress symptoms, financial strain, and relational difficulties among whistleblowers (Bjorkelo, 2013, Rothshield & Miethe, 1999; Peters *et al.*, 2011; Van der Velden *et al.*, 2018; Park & Lewis, 2018).

Importantly, harm does not stem only from overt retaliation. One of the most damaging experiences for whistleblowers is inaction; when reports are met with silence and nothing changes. When wrongdoing persists and leadership maintains silence, the whistleblower's distress deepens, and the work environment deteriorates further.

Workplace bullying and harassment are among the most frequently reported forms of wrongdoing. These issues are strongly associated with long-term sick leave, mental health problems, and an early exit from working life. In such cases, whistleblowing is not an act of disloyalty, but a necessary attempt to restore dignity, safety, and fairness at work.

Speaking-Up Cultures and the Role of HR

Traditionally, whistleblowing has been managed by the legal or compliance functions. However, this approach is insufficient. Whistleblowing is deeply embedded in organizational culture, leadership practices, and the psychosocial work environment. For this reason, human resource management (HRM) plays a pivotal role. A key insight from the research field is the distinction between speaking-up systems and speaking-up cultures. While formal reporting channels are necessary, they are not enough. Employees decide to speak up based on whether they believe they will be listened to, taken seriously, and protected - not merely on if a channel exists (Ferrère *et al.*, 2022; Previtali & Cerchiello, 2021).

Organizations with healthy speaking-up cultures tend to have:

- Higher psychological safety
- Greater trust in management
- More internal reporting and fewer external escalations
- Better long-term organizational performance

In such environments, whistleblowing is normalized as part of occupational health and safety work, rather than framed as a disruption or threat. This approach also benefits employees, as worker representatives are typically embedded in health and safety forums, giving employees collective voice, protection, and legitimacy when concerns are raised. HR departments are uniquely positioned to shape these conditions. By integrating whistleblowing into health, safety, and work environment routines, HR can help ensure that reporting wrongdoing becomes a shared responsibility rather than an individual risk. However, for this to be effective, HR must balance its dual role carefully. HR must be viewed as a guardian of the individual as well as a guardian of the organization. All too often it is the latter at the cost of the former. When this imbalance occurs, trust erodes and employees may hesitate to raise concerns. By actively

upholding employee protection alongside organizational integrity, HR can foster a culture in which speaking up is both safe and expected, reinforcing whistleblowing as a constructive and legitimate part of workplace practice.

Whistleblower Well-Being as Preventive Work Environment Practice

From a preventive perspective, whistleblower well-being should be understood as an indicator of workplace quality. When employees feel safe to speak up, it signals that the organization is capable of learning, self-correction, and ethical reflection. Psychological safety is particularly important. Employees who believe they can raise concerns without fear of humiliation or punishment are more likely to report early signs of wrongdoing. This reduces harm and prevents toxic situations from becoming entrenched. Conversely, workplaces characterized by fear, silence, or willful blindness create blind spots where unethical practices can flourish. Over time, these environments erode trust, health, and sustainability. Supporting whistleblowers, therefore, is not only about protecting individuals, but also about safeguarding the work environment as a whole. The presence of whistleblowing is not a sign of poor management or a dysfunctional workplace, but of an organization that enables openness, accountability, and continuous improvement. Therefore, whistleblowing should be understood not as evidence of failure, but as a marker of organizational maturity and ethical capacity and indicative of systems that allow concerns to surface before harm escalates.

Whistleblowing is Between Institutional Norms and Personal Ethics

Professional bodies occupy a critical yet often underdeveloped role in supporting whistleblowers. While they formally position themselves as guardians of professional standards and public interest, the literature suggests that, in practice, they provide limited direct support to those who act on these commitments. This gap highlights a tension between the moral expectations embedded in professional codes and the lived realities of professionals navigating competing obligations to employers, clients, and personal ethics. One useful way to understand this is through the interaction between role-based duties and individual moral reasoning (Huxley et al., 2026). For example, whistleblowing is rarely motivated by personal gain. Rather, decisions to speak up are often shaped by deeply held values and internal moral pressures – in which cognitive dissonance is a key factor: when individuals witness misconduct, they may experience a conflict between loyalty to their organization and their ethical beliefs. Speaking up can become a way to resolve this tension, alleviating the psychological discomfort of knowing about wrongdoing and the guilt associated with failing to act. In addition, many whistleblowers are driven by a desire to protect others. This altruistic impulse, which can take the form of concern for patients, clients, colleagues, or the public, can outweigh the instinct for self-preservation, reinforcing the idea that whistleblowing is grounded less in self-interest and more in moral commitment (Foxley, 2026).

Professional bodies codify norms that are meant to guide ethical conduct, yet these norms may not always offer clear or actionable support when members face wrongdoing in practice. As a result, whistleblowers often rely on personal moral convictions rather than institutional backing, suggesting that professional codes alone are insufficient without supportive structures and guidance. This points to an important opportunity for professional bodies to move beyond

symbolic commitments and play a more active role. They could provide clearer interpretive guidance on ethical dissent, establish safe advisory channels, and publicly affirm the legitimacy of whistleblowing as part of professional responsibility. Crucially, there is also a need for stronger collaboration between professional bodies and whistleblowing NGOs. Such interaction could help bridge the gap between formal ethical standards and practical support, ensuring that professionals who speak up are not left to navigate these challenges in isolation, but are instead backed by both their professional institutions and external support networks.

Another interesting way to look at this is to ask whether the reasoning behind whistleblowing reflects the characteristic values associated with different professional roles. It may be that nurses are guided more by compassion and concern for patient welfare, accountants by adherence to rules and regulatory compliance, and lawyers by principles of justice and the proper application of the rule of law. While this remains indicative, it suggests that professionals may draw not only on general moral considerations but also on role-specific values embedded in their field, shaping how they interpret and justify acts of ethical dissent. This raises the question of whether acting on such values should always be expected or not, particularly in cases involving misconduct or illegality. Explanations for whistleblowing often point to a strong sense of duty grounded in values that individuals hold deeply, some personal, others tied to professional norms. Yet indications suggest that neither role relativity nor strict adherence to professional neutrality fully captures how individuals respond in these situations. Whistleblowers may reject misconduct even where their formal role permits, or even requires, silence (for example through norms such as confidentiality), instead of drawing on their own moral identity to legitimize speaking up. This points toward the need for clearer expectations of individual responsibility, such as a duty to prevent harm or a duty of candour. However, such obligations must be matched by robust protections: if individuals are expected to act on these values, they must also be supported and safeguarded when they do so (Huxley et al., 2026).

Sustainable Workplaces Require Action, Not Silence

A central finding in whistleblowing research is that action matters more than procedures (Grønstad *et al.*, 2025). Organizations may formally comply with legal requirements yet still fail whistleblowers when reported concerns are dismissed, minimized, or reframed as personal problems or issues. In some cases, whistleblowers' stress reactions are even used to discredit the content and substance of their disclosures. Such responses not only harm the individual involved but also undermine the organization's ability to learn from critical information and prevent future harm. Creating sustainable workplaces therefore requires that organizations treat whistleblowing as a resource for improvement rather than a disruption. Reported concerns must be handled transparently and followed by visible action, with human resources, employee representatives, and leaders working collaboratively throughout the process. Whistleblower well-being should be recognized as a shared organizational responsibility, not an individual burden. In the long term, sustainability depends on workplaces that are willing to listen, respond, and learn from those who speak up.

Toward a More Sustainable Future of Work

Whistleblowing holds significant potential as a driver of decent work and good health, but this potential can only be realized when organizations move beyond formal compliance and actively cultivate cultures grounded in dialogue, accountability, and care. Treating whistleblowing merely as a legal obligation, risks overlooking its deeper significance for how work is organized, experienced, and sustained over time. A sustainable future of work depends

on workplaces that are able to receive difficult information, respond constructively, and protect those who raise concerns in the interest of the collective.

As emphasized by Grønstad *et al.* (2025), sustainable human resource management must be understood holistically, integrating psychological, legal, social, and organizational dimensions rather than addressing them in isolation. Whistleblower well-being lies precisely at the intersection of these domains, where individual health, ethical responsibility, organizational learning, and societal trust converge. When whistleblowers are harmed or marginalized, the consequences extend beyond the individual to affect participation in working life, organizational integrity, and long-term sustainability. In addition, the marginalization or mistreatment of whistleblowers carries economic consequences for organizations. When employees who have already been recruited, trained, and integrated into the workplace are pushed out or choose to leave due to poor handling of whistleblowing, organizations encounter significant replacement costs. These include expenses related to recruitment, onboarding, and training of new staff, as well as the loss of accumulated knowledge and experience. Such turnover not only increases direct costs but also reduces overall efficiency and productivity in the short- and medium- term. From a sustainability perspective, this represents a failure to utilize human resources effectively, undermining both organizational performance and long-term resilience.

Advancing whistleblowing as a force for sustainable working life therefore requires concrete action at both organizational and system levels. Employers, HR professionals, and regulators must treat whistleblowing as an ongoing responsibility rather than a one-time reporting event, ensuring clear procedures, timely follow-up, and visible accountability when concerns are raised. Organizations should build structures that protect whistleblowers over time, including access to psychosocial support, worker representation, and transparent communication about how reports are handled. Leadership training, employee involvement, and integrating whistleblowing into everyday health, safety, and work environment practices are essential steps toward normalizing speaking up and preventing harm. Sustainable workplaces are not built on silence, but on the courage to speak up - and on the collective capacity to listen, learn, and act responsibly.

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