Are you turning a blind eye?

By Richard Hart, director, ProActive ReSolutions

Why do competent, intelligent and otherwise responsible adults sometimes turn a blind eye in the face of risks to the health, safety and wellbeing of people and of organisations?

- A nurse remains silent about the chief of staff prescribing a contra-indicated medication for a patient.
- A manager shows her CEO onto the plant floor without mentioning the CEO’s failure to don steel-toed footwear in compliance with the site’s regulations.
- The Directors and senior executives of a massive, multinational corporation make no open comment about the ‘creative restatement’ of profits contrary to accepted accounting principles.
- A worker says nothing after witnessing a colleague berate another in front of customers in the store area, and then make repeated, obviously unwelcome sexual advances towards a supplier’s new female delivery driver.

In finding out why adults sometimes turn a blind eye, we typically latch on to explanations that attribute the behaviour to the person’s innate traits like personality and character. Yet a string of research projects, starting with the famous Stanford Prison Experiment of the 1970s, has demonstrated the importance of other factors, including people’s perceptions of their roles and responsibilities, group norms, authority structures, and other external factors.

**Context driven**

In fact, it turns out that all workplace behaviour – not just the behaviour of staying silent – is entirely context driven. Simply put: everyone will stay silent under some circumstances, and speak out in others.

The confusing thing is that the circumstances that inspire people to speak or to stay silent can differ dramatically from person to person. In certain situations, I’ll speak when you won’t; in others, you’ll speak when I won’t.

People are less likely to speak out on about problem workplace behaviours and their impact if:

- They are unclear about the rules, which behaviours are prohibited in the workplace, and which behaviours are required under policy, regulation and law;
- They don’t understand that speaking out about important issues is part of their job;
- They have seen ‘unwritten rules’ in the workplace that don’t allow for speaking out;
- They have witnessed others being punished by managers or peers for speaking out; and
- They lack confidence in their skills and ability to speak out effectively.
Disempowering people or depriving them of voices in the workplace can be dangerous in many ways. When individuals in the workplace turn a blind eye to unethical, illegal, unsafe or disrespectful behaviour, they can expose themselves, the organisation and other individuals to unacceptable risk of harm.

Successful, thriving organisations are more likely to be ones that develop a culture of behaviour in which people find and exercise their courage to speak out – in helpful and productive ways – about important issues.

**Speaking out**

Encouragingly, both anecdotal and research-based evidence indicate that organisations can in fact do a great deal to change people’s behaviour with respect to speaking out. The answer is to influence people’s perceptions of the context in which they are working.

Some ideas based on past cases:

- Make sure that the organisation’s written rules are clearly stated, and understood by all.
  
  > A government agency in eastern Australia found dramatic changes in people’s willingness to speak out about disrespectful behaviour once the rules around workplace interactions had been published, circulated and discussed.

- Make the unwritten rules explicit; talk about them, determine which ones are unhelpful – and deal with those.
  
  > The results of a local government’s employee survey demonstrated a clear correlation between the organisation’s low workplace moral and the perception of employees that individuals were promoted faster for putting up with bad behaviour from managers and co-workers. A series of facilitated, high-profile large-group dialogues about the organisation’s unwritten rules led to open statements of commitment by management, a change in perception among staff, and a significant increase in morale.

- Make sure people understand that they have a responsibility to decide whether issues are important, and to address the important issues professionally and respectfully.
  
  > During training sessions in the workplace of a federal agency, many people expressed surprise at the suggestion that their responsibility was to remain professional and respectful in the face of disrespectful behaviour. As the result of the dialogue sparked by the training sessions, the ‘new’ idea quickly took root and became a guiding principle that turned dynamics around in the workplace.

**Some other key strategies**

- Make open and direct conversations at all levels of the organisation a key indicator by which the organisation measures its success.
- Encourage and reward people for having open and direct conversations about important issues with others, especially superiors.
• Don’t tolerate retribution for speaking out respectfully and professionally about work-related issues.
• Hold people to account for turning a blind eye to important issues.
• Coach, mentor, support – demand – that people instead talk openly and directly to each other about important issues.
• Hold people to account for talking badly about others in the workplace.
• As part of performance reviews, assess how well people raise and address important issues professionally and respectfully with colleagues at all levels.
• Assess leaders on their performance in identifying and dealing with unprofessional and disrespectful behaviour – and in fostering respectful and professional behaviour in their workgroups.

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