



How Do We Bring This Runaway Complainer Under Control?

Q: An employee constantly files new complaints about every action he believes is in violation of company policies. Coworkers are frustrated at being subjected to these constant investigations. What is the best way to handle this situation and bring order back into the work environment?

-- *Overwhelmed with Gripes, ethics officer, services sector, Madison, Mississippi*

A: In the post-Enron environment, most organizations are doing all they can to encourage employees to use "help lines" and report activity that may violate company policies. Most ethics and compliance officers say that what is not being reported is their biggest risk factor. Instilling a sense of personal accountability and responsibility among employees for the actions of others is a major challenge for human resources.

Still, crying wolf too often can jeopardize the integrity of the entire internal-controls process.

Here's the first question you should ask: Are the complaints valid? If not, then your vigilante employee needs to know about the extent of the damage he's causing--both to his own reputation as well as that of the people he works with. It sounds like respect is a value that needs some reinforcement at your organization. If current policies don't provide a remedy, change them promptly.

But there are other questions to ponder. What if the complaints are valid? Are there in fact ongoing violations of company policy? Or are there at least legitimate perceptions of ongoing violations? If so, then why are the coworkers upset about there being too many complaints?

In many instances, problems arise because the technical policy does not conform to day-to-day practices. In such cases, coworkers may be reacting to a policy that should be changed. Or your outraged coworkers may be reacting to inconsistent enforcement of policies throughout the company.

Imagine if your lone ranger were sitting on the side of an interstate highway reporting the license-plate numbers of all the cars going over the speed limit. The public would be outraged, but each of the cars would in fact be violating the law.

Policies and rules are the foundation of a compliance program. But they're not worth the paper they are written on if you don't take them seriously. Bringing "order back into the work environment" requires you to look carefully at the policies you instruct workers to follow, as well as reasons why they aren't adhered to on a daily basis.

SOURCE: David Gebler, president, [Working Values, Ltd.](#), Sharon, Massachusetts, March 30, 2004.