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HIGHLIGHTING WRONGDOINGS

## ENCOURAGE WHISTLE-BLOWING

**T**HE Collins Dictionary defines the idiom “shoot the messenger” as to unfairly blame a person who has given you bad news or information, when you should instead be angry with the people who are responsible for the situation.

The idiom has its roots in ancient Greece. Messengers were sent to impart official news, and these messengers sometimes incurred the wrath of the one receiving the bad news. The sentiment was expressed in the play *Antigone*, written by Sophocles around 440 BC: “For no man delights in the bearer of bad news.”

“Don’t shoot the messenger” is an admonition to not blame the bearer of bad news. It is often used when someone reveals a difficult truth that the listener does not want to hear. It reminds the listener that the truth is not the fault of the person revealing the truth.

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### ESCALATING BAD NEWS

There is a tendency to get angry and take things out on the bearer of bad news. What then happens is that no one is prepared to escalate bad news to the superiors to avoid their wrath.

This creates a culture where bad news is held back from the superiors and valiant efforts are made by the subordinates to manage the bad news themselves.

Sometimes the bad news is properly managed and the com-

pany is not severely impacted. Sometimes, the bad news is badly managed and snowballs into a bigger situation.

Eventually, it will reach the ears of the superiors. Had the superiors (including boards) been notified of the bad news much earlier, they (the board together with the management) may have been in a better position to address the issues satisfactorily.

Indeed, what we need is to tell all to escalate serious bad news as soon as possible — that should be the culture. As such, bad news escalation should be encouraged without victimising the bearer of bad news.

### WHISTLE-BLOWERS

Whistle-blowers are messengers of bad news. The whistle-blower sometimes is victimised for highlighting an inconvenient truth. It could be a sexual harassment case at the senior level (or for that matter, at any level) or corrupt practices or environmental, social and governance-related non-compliance.

All these impact the brand, the morale and the profits of the company. There may be a temptation to sweep things under the carpet, to pretend that it is not there. The whistle-blower may become the victim for highlighting the inconvenient truth — they get “shot”.

It is a fact that whistle-blowers are an effective medium to highlight wrongdoings. Whistle-blowing should be encouraged.

There is no stigma attached to a whistle-blower as they are trying to right a wrong. But there will always be the fear of victimisation among whistle-blowers. Most companies ask whistle-blowers to communicate with someone who is independent of the management, say the independent directors or internal auditors.

Some companies have taken the need for independence a notch higher by stating that the whistle-blower can communicate with a third party — someone outside the company. Such parties may include accounting firms that provide whistle-blowing hotline services.

The whistle-blower is still apprehensive as there have been cases where the whistle-blower had ended up as the victim despite the promises of anonymity and protection.

The honest whistle-blower has a dilemma. He feels morally obliged to right a wrong and yet he has an equally moral obligation to put food on the table for his family. He cannot afford to lose his job. One can never tell of the extent that someone will go to silence a whistle-blower. His or her family’s welfare and safety may be at stake.

The whistle-blower needs to balance two moral demands. Although all whistle-blower policies speak of confidentiality, we know that we live in a very porous society.

The names of whistle-blowers

may be leaked. An effective solution to this problem is to encourage anonymous whistle-blowing — the end justifies the means. There is again no stigma in anonymity if we can understand the concerns of the whistle-blower. Anonymous whistle-blowing is a win-win situation: the company finds out about a wrongdoing and the whistle-blower’s identity is safeguarded.

There is no need to state that the identity of the whistle-blower must be revealed in their letters before the company will consider the letters. The reason given for such a stance is that the company can follow up with the whistle-blower. Any such statement will discourage whistle-blowers. Rather, if the anonymous whistle-blowing letters do not have adequate details, then all we need to do is to disregard the letters.

Often, there are adequate details. Sure, there will be a handful of malicious and slanderous letters with no merit. A cursory reading of the letter with some basic investigation will ensure the letter ends up where it belongs — in the bin.

Maybe it is time to have the physical suggestion box in our office without any CCTV in that area. That may assure anonymous whistle-blowers that they will not be traced.

The writer is chief executive officer of Minority Shareholders Watch Group.