Breaking the Silence: 5 Practical Steps to Strengthen Speak-Up Culture in 2026



Organizations with compliance programs and reporting channels in place may think they are on top of internal risks. But there is still a hurdle they may not account for: silence. Despite having accessible whistleblowing channels, employees may hesitate to use them. Research shows that 81% of employees have witnessed workplace misconduct, but only 72.7% report it. These gaps can quickly snowball into erosion of an organization's integrity and culture.

Employees may stay silent due to concerns about retaliation, unclear reporting processes, and uncertainty about outcomes, all of which may discourage them from speaking up. For workplace leaders, strengthening a speak-up culture is critical to protecting employees. Building that culture requires more than a reporting system; it also requires strong leadership, psychological safety, and tools and processes that employees believe will work.

1. Make Psychological Safety a Leadership Priority

Employees are more likely to report misconduct when they believe their workplace will shield them from retaliation. Fear of retaliation is one of the most common reasons employees stay silent, as 33.2% of employees report witnessing retaliation against whistleblowers, based on research previously mentioned.

The bottom line: Employees are worried that reporting means they're risking their careers, workplace relationships, or retribution from other employees.

Psychological safety must become a leadership priority; to that end, HR and safety leaders can reinforce this by:

- Communicating anti-retaliation policies regularly, not just during onboarding or annual training.
- Training managers to recognize subtle or unintentional forms of retaliation, such as exclusion from projects or schedule changes.
- Encouraging leaders to openly acknowledge ethical concerns and reinforce that reporting problems is part of protecting the workplace.

When employees see leaders take a firm approach to addressing concerns, trust grows. Conversely, when employees see silence or defensiveness, reporting can decline.

2. Provide Multiple Ways to Report Concerns

Every member of the company has different preferences and working styles. To that end, employees often prefer to report concerns in ways that feel comfortable to them. Some may opt to speak with a supervisor, while others may choose reporting tools that allow them to remain anonymous.

Organizations can offer multiple reporting channels, such as:

- Phone hotlines
- Secure web forms
- Mobile reporting tools
- Email reporting options
- Anonymous reporting systems

Research shows that employees are often more comfortable reporting through confidential channels than by approaching Human Resources directly. Those surveyed preferred reporting via phone hotlines and AI-powered chatbots over speaking with members of their HR departments. This highlights the importance of providing accessible, flexible reporting options.

The goal, then, is to ensure employees understand how those options work. Reporting systems should be easy to use; when employees don't even know reporting channels exist or where to find them, it can limit the number of reports submitted. Simple, accessible reporting methods make it more likely that employees will raise concerns early, before problems can escalate.

3. Show Employees What Happens After They Speak Up

One of the most common questions employees have about reporting is also one of the least addressed: what happens next?

Uncertainty about the investigation process often discourages employees from speaking up. They may worry that nothing will change, their report will be lost in the system, or leadership will ignore the issue.

Transparency can significantly improve trust in reporting programs. Organizations can strengthen confidence by:

- Explaining how reports are reviewed and investigated.
- Providing general timelines for investigation processes.
- Sharing anonymized summaries of resolved cases.
- Communicating improvements made because of employee reporting.

Employees often desire greater visibility into how investigations are handled and whether misconduct is addressed; after all, the scenarios that prompted these reports are affecting their daily work lives. When organizations provide this insight, while maintaining confidentiality, it can reinforce accountability and strengthen trust.

4. Equip Managers to Handle Reports Properly

Managers often play a decisive role in employees' willingness to report.

While a supportive manager can encourage open dialogue, an unprepared manager can unintentionally discourage reporting.

Oftentimes, managers lack guidance on the best way to respond when employees raise sensitive issues. HR leaders can strengthen reporting cultures by equipping managers

with practical training on:

- How to respond calmly and constructively when concerns are raised.
- When and how to escalate issues appropriately.
- How to document concerns without compromising confidentiality.
- How to avoid behaviors that may be interpreted as retaliation.

Managers who understand their role in supporting ethical culture can help reinforce the organization's values by reflecting them in their everyday interactions.

5. Use Technology to Improve Accessibility and Trust

Technology is increasingly shaping how employees report workplace concerns. Digital reporting tools can make it easier for employees to report concerns without fear of exposure.

Many employees now view these tools positively. In fact, around 78% of employees believe AI-powered reporting tools can make the reporting process safer and more confidential.

However, trust remains the top priority. Employees want transparency about how reporting systems operate. Organizations should clearly explain:

- Who reviews submitted reports.
- How confidentiality is maintained.
- How data is protected.
- Whether technology, such as AI, assists in the reporting process and how.

When employees understand how these systems work, they are more likely to trust them.

Building a Culture Where Speaking Up Is the Norm

A strong speak-up culture cannot be forged with just a hotline or policy. It must be built through consistent actions that foster psychological safety and trust.

Organizations that succeed in building this culture tend to share several characteristics:

- Leaders reinforce ethical expectations consistently.
- Reporting channels are accessible and reliable.
- Managers are trained and willing to handle concerns responsibly.
- Investigation processes are transparent and fair.

For HR and workplace leaders, strengthening a speak-up culture is more than compliance; it's also about creating an environment where employees feel psychologically safe to report. When employees believe their voices matter and that raising concerns will lead to meaningful action, they become active participants in protecting the organization and their colleagues.

> ## About The Author
>
> About The Author
>
> Shannon Walker is the founder of WhistleBlower Security Inc., a Case IQ Company and executive VP of Strategy at Case IQ. Case IQ is a global provider of investigative case management software, compliance automation tools, and whistleblower hotline

solutions. Shannon frequently speaks around the world on whistleblowing, ethics, corporate culture and diversity.