



"What were they thinking?"

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On why every public manager should

Take a Whistleblower to Lunch

In every organization, when something is going wrong, someone needs to fix this something. Indeed, when something *important* is going *seriously* wrong, someone needs to fix this something right now. Yet—all too often—no one does. No one!

Why? Because before anyone can fix this something, someone has to point out that this something needs to be fixed. Yet, if someone does point out that this something needs to be fixed, this very same someone is also pointing out (perhaps only implicitly, but nevertheless very clearly) that:

- (a) This something has been going wrong for quite a while.
- (b) No one has made any effort to get it fixed.

A few months ago—okay, maybe it was a few years ago—this something would have been easy to fix. It had been going wrong for a while, but not seriously wrong. It was a small problem that was easy to fix.

Everyone knew then that it was a problem, but it was not yet at the top of the organization's Fix-It-Now List. It could always be fixed tomorrow.

So, no one fixed it. Indeed, no one even mentioned that it needed fixing. Everyone knew. But no one said anything. Everyone already had a lot of really important stuff to do.

And if someone did point out how that this important something needed to be fixed, his or her reward might have been assigned to do the fixing.

Moreover, before someone could fix this something, he or she would need authority, support, and resources. This would require several people, including some quite senior people, to authorize the fixing. And everyone was already asking their boss (and their boss's boss) for the authorization, support, and resources to do many other very important things.

Thus, the reward for pointing out what needed to be fixed could be another big task with no resources or support. Who would ask for that?

Of course, everyone knew: "This

something is a problem. But it is not so big a problem that it can't wait."

Furthermore, no one had sole responsibility for this problem. A lot of people had some responsibility. For no one, however, was it a top priority.

Finally, before this problem could be fixed, a number of quite senior people would need to authorize the fixing. And, in authorizing this fixing, these senior people would be confessing that something had indeed gone seriously wrong and they had failed to notice. Or, if they did notice, they had failed to take any action.

Thus, whenever an organization is confronted with a serious problem, the thinking and the behavior of most people follow a well-known script:

"I can't think about this now. I'll go crazy if I do. I'll think about it tomorrow. I can stand it then.

After all, tomorrow is another day."

Unfortunately, when that another day comes, it arrives as a big crisis.

Whistleblowers are valuable. They accurately point out that something has gone seriously wrong. Most organizations punish this behavior. Unless a key manager visibly supports a whistleblower, small future errors will inevitably become big disasters.

Still, the organization may have one, lonely outlier. This nonconformist is very troubled by the problem. He or she understands that the long-term consequences are quite serious.

Moreover, this outlier can't believe that everyone is ignoring the problem.

Finally, the outlier can't take it anymore and morphs into a whistleblower. Simultaneously, the outlier becomes an outcast.

Yes: there are legal protections. The outcast can't be easily fired, or transferred, or subjected to the traditional bureaucratic punishments.

For employees of the U.S. Government, there is the Whistleblower Protection Enhancement Act. And in many industries, employees also have specific protections that constrain official retaliation.

The law cannot, however, require fellow employees to be friends with a whistleblower. It can't require workplace colleagues to engage in a civil conversation with a whistleblower. It can't prevent a whistleblower from being ostracized.

Such behavior is quite predictable. Moreover it makes the organization vulnerable. For such ostracism sends a clear, simple message throughout the organization: "Never blow a whistle! If you like working here, and want to continue to like working here, don't even think about blowing a whistle."

This is when a senior executive should take the whistleblower to lunch. The executive needs to make a visible display of un-ostracizing him or her. For if the trend setters in the organization are able to vilify the outlier as an outcast, no one will ever blow another whistle again.

And if no one is willing to blow even a small whistle, how will the leadership team learn about its big problems in time to fix them? After all, it's an empirical rule of organizational life: Bad news never travels up.

That's why every manager needs to take the organization's whistleblowers to lunch. If no manager does, they too have all sent a message: We don't tolerate whistleblowers.

Managers who want to eliminate small problems before they become big ones should take their whistleblowers to a very visible lunch. **B**

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