



CONFERENCE RECORD

**Sessions Presented at
Electro/88
Boston, MA
May 10-12, 1988**

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ORGANIZATIONAL RESPONSE TO
ASSESSED RISK: COMPLAINT CHANNELS

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Whistleblowers need complaint channels that work. And organizations need complaint channels that work. For an organization to deal effectively with assessed risk, it needs to know about the risk in timely fashion. In fact it wants to know as much as possible about risk in order to make a good assessment. Hence the need for well-designed complaints channels.

CHARACTERISTICS OF WHISTLEBLOWERS

Good design requires meeting the specifications of the consumer. The consumer in this case is the person with knowledge of risk, the "whistleblower." What are the typical characteristics of a potential whistleblower and what do they indicate for complaint channels?

Most people who contemplate the idea of complaining about risk:

- are very fearful of retaliation;
- are concerned about loss of privacy for themselves, possibly their families and/or co-workers;
- are fearful of being seen to be disloyal, supersensitive, cowardly or childish;
- are fearful that they lack "enough evidence" about the risk;
- have widely differing views as to whom they will trust among possible complaint-handlers or other sources of help;
- do not necessarily wish to give up control over their concern or complaint;
- feel they lack the skills they need effectively to change the situation;
- are afraid that nothing will be done; if they do complain;
- just want the risk reduced or eliminated; (whistleblowers are not typically looking for revenge or public vindication, at least at first).

There are of course exceptions. But most people concerned about risk fit the profile above. What happens next? In many cases the risk perceiver gears up courage and reports the risk and the problem is resolved. If this does not work, there will remain people who perceive themselves as having failed in attempts to report risk.

Those who believe they have failed in their attempts to reduce or eliminate risk will typically see only four options remaining. They will consider:

- quitting the job;
- trying to forget the risk;
- going to some public agency or news media;
- "acting out," by sabotaging the risky equipment, stealing wastes, or taking pictures of the problem situation, or acting in some other covert fashion.

IMPLICATIONS FOR COMPLAINT CHANNELS

The facts reported above suggest definite specifications for organizational response and for complaint channels. A CEO must begin with the proposition that many good people do not know how to complain effectively and are reluctant to try. The organization must have policies and training programs which stress safety and ethics as business necessities. Policies must be communicated constantly. All managers and employees must come to believe that top management insists on safe and ethical behavior.

In addition there must be complaint channels outside ordinary line management. To meet the needs of complainants, these channels must:

- be confidential and private;
- be seen as having the full confidence of the CEO;
- have redundant channels and options, so people have a chance to choose among multiple

be attached to a satisfactory investigative capability;

provide a chance for the complainant to know what has happened as a result of the complaint;

provide complainants the sense that they do have the skills to complain effectively and responsibly;

provide complainants with the belief that it is effective and important to report risk;

separate effective handling of risk from punishment of offenders enough so that a complainant does not have to feel responsible for disciplinary action taken against offenders.

Most complaint channels (hot line, safety coordinators, ombudsman, etc.) will be inside the organization. However, a number of professional organizations have an ombudsman to serve all professionals who are members. The IEEE should consider establishing an Ombudsman Office to advise and counsel on risk issues. This office could also serve as safe conduit for information from IEEE members to the CEOs of organizations employing engineers, thus insuring serious consideration of ethical and safety concerns reported by professionals. Experience of the author indicates this is an swift, effective mechanism for the occasional serious case where the concerns of engineers are being ignored by lower level managers.

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Journal Title: Electro/88 conference record ; sessions presented at Electro/88 Boston, MA, May 10-12, 1988.

Article Author:

Article Title: mary rowe or rowe and baker; 'Organizational Response to Assessed Risk,'

Volume:

Issue:

Date: 1988

Pages: 30/3/1-2

6/20/2014 3:55:06 PM

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