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Don't Be a Tattletale!

Mom! Mom! Mom! Patrick is annoying us.”
“Quit being a tattletale and tell your brother I said to be nice.”

We can all relate to this conversation; simply change the names to make it apply to ourselves and our children. It's interesting isn't it? The first experience children have being told not to tell on another is from the very people who encouraged us all to be honest and forthright in all our ways—our parents. Don't tell. Don't tattle. Just leave it alone.

So the first message we were left with was don't go to the authority figure and tell them about a wrongdoing; just keep it to yourself. As time went on we learned other lessons about coming forward to express a problem.

Remember school days? Those days when we confided a problem to another of our friends. Then the beans got spilled, and it got back to the person we were talking about. Depending on your gender, you likely experienced stony silence or a recess beating. Apparently, telling on another was neither good for your social relationships or physical well-being.

Then, we moved into the workforce and joined others in the march for profitability. Most of us have experienced a manager who has lived up to the Peter Principle. We confided a problem to our manager who then went directly to the person we spoke about and told him what we said. There was no end to the difficulties being a tattletale caused.

It doesn't take a psychologist to understand how negative reinforcement can shape one's behavior. Is it any wonder why we face a workforce who has an ingrained resistance to reporting a dishonest employee?

Not only is there an underlying psychological aspect to the resistance to tell on another, but that resistance is reinforced by our language. Informant, narc, snitch, tattletale...none of which are the least bit complementary. Yet, it is these very people who help close cases every day in both the public and private sectors. Some people choose to inform for the good of society; others do it for their own self-interest.

We have all dealt with the difficulty of getting a dishonest associate to make an admission of wrongdoing. But, getting that person to then tell on someone else is often an even more difficult proposition.

Knowledge of Other's Dishonesty

About twenty years ago there was a study published by Service Merchandise Corporation putting the number of their dishonest associates with knowledge of other employees stealing at 20 percent. So according to their cases there was a one in five chance of an associate having knowledge of another's dishonesty when they were interviewed.

In our last column we had been reviewing our old cases, so we thought we would examine our files to see if we could replicate the percentage Service Merchandise found. What we discovered from our cases was that 30 percent of the employees we interviewed had knowledge of another associate stealing from the organization.

We decided to look further and determine if there was any relationship to the age of the person being interviewed. What we found was quite stunning. In the small sampling of 29 cases we reviewed, this is what we found.

- In 21 cases (72 percent) the person was in the 18 to 25 age range.
- In 5 cases (17 percent) the person was in the 26 to 32 age range.
- In 3 cases (10 percent) the person was in the 50 to 67 age range.

So in 26 cases, those between the age of 18 and 32 accounted for almost 90 percent of the employees having knowledge of other associates' dishonesty. Interestingly, this is the same age group that accounts for most arrests. The 18 to 25 age range has consistently held that first place rank since records were kept beginning in the mid-1800s. These are the risk-taking years for most people; those years before people began to settle down and change their focus from today to tomorrow. Looking forward to career, family, and a home makes risk-taking, including stealing, less desirable.

Asking the Question

So how does your group of interviewers stand up to these numbers? We suspect the percentage of associates with knowledge of others stealing is much higher in certain companies depending on the makeup of the employee population.

Some LP departments do not do interviews dealing with implications, so attempting to obtain one is not worth the bother for some interviewers. If they are not allowed to talk with people later, why ask for implications? The decision whether

or not to interview on an implication is a company option, and there are good reasons for not doing so. But should your interviewers at least ask the dishonest associates whether they have knowledge of others stealing?

"Do you know of anyone taking merchandise or money from the company?"

"No."

"Oh, well, okay then, let's move on."

Well, that was hardly effective, but at least the associate was asked if he knew of others stealing. Plus, if the question is asked often enough, with enough employees someone might just say, "Yes, I do know of someone."

Now, what value is there in learning if other employees are stealing? Regardless of whether the organization permits interviewing on implications, there can be tremendous value in at least asking the question.

- The amount of money spent to identify dishonest associates through XBR, tip lines, video, and other means is a major effort of most LP departments.
- A focused investigation following an implication will likely reveal results more quickly since it is targeted on a likely employee.
- "Birds of a feather flock together," so the most likely place to find a thief is from a thief.
- Knowing how a person is stealing allows for the strengthening or implementation of controls.
- Learning someone was taught how to steal leads us to the teacher, and thus the source of the cancer.
- Failing to ask about implications does not address the scope of the problem. This is like getting an employee to tell us what we knew from the investigation. We still have no idea of the extent of the losses attributable to him.
- Management awareness can be heightened to deter future losses.
- There is a larger return on investment from the investigation.

A Lack of Emphasis

The biggest reason implications are not obtained is the lack of emphasis placed on them during the interviews. In

most of the interviews we have reviewed for companies, implications were either not sought by the interviewer or they were an afterthought given only marginal effort.

Interviewers are focused on substantiating the investigation by obtaining admissions confirming what is known. Most interviewers attempt to develop the admission into other areas of dishonesty, but by the time they get to knowledge of others, they are focused on obtaining the statement and implications become the poor stepchild of development.

Sometimes the validity of admissions made by an associate are called into question. Substantiation goes a long way toward documenting the statements' correctness. But doesn't an implication verified through investigation also support the truthfulness of the employee's confession. Knowledge that Joe is stealing is confirmed by subsequent investigation and confession, which clearly supports the confession of the first employee.

As part of an interviewer monitoring and measuring program, we also should be evaluating the numbers of implications being generated based on the ages of the employee population. In our next column we will consider methods to develop implications with employees.

From the Mailbox

In our last column we posed a series of unanswerable questions, among them "Where do all the missing socks go?" We received this answer from a respected senior LP executive who shall remain anonymous for national security reasons.

"Aaaahhh... finally a question I can answer... It seems likely to me that there is an 'alternate universe' out there, like a spider on a mirror, an exact, but reverse, image of our own universe in all ways except three. (1) They get all the ball point pens. (2) We get all the empty coat hangers. (3) And yes, you guessed correctly, we share the socks.

Huh, we never would have guessed. ■

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