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Reflections of a whistleblower and a way forward

By Solange Martin

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Whistleblowers expose illegal and unethical behavior within organizations by blowing the whistle on wrongdoing. In recent years, they have played important and well-publicized roles in revealing fraud and misdemeanors in large international companies. Not all whistleblowers reveal large-scale scandals, but all contribute to continuous improvement in any organization and should be praised for doing so. Despite this, most whistleblowers are ignored and not seen as relevant to business improvement.

Nobody would have heard my story if one of my fellow SCCE members had not pushed me to write about it. I know now that I should have shared my experience earlier and also, sadly, that I should have handled my situation differently. We all agree that we become wiser after the event.

First I will set the scene so you will understand the context of my work. I will then explain my findings and why I used a factual report to alert the chief executive officer of the parent company of the group I was working in. Finally, I will discuss the aftermath and what should have been done on the part of company.

The discovery

I had been working in an energy company as an expatriate very successfully for five years in West Africa (Gabon) when, in December 2011, I was appointed as commercial manager in Cameroon. I was very happy and comfortable working with this company and was grateful that my professional competencies and skills were being recognized.

My new position involved providing legal support to the drilling team together with commercial assistance with the development of forthcoming production. Reading between the lines, the board wanted all expenses to be justified, supported by written contracts, and in line with market price. I did not realize at the time that there were some pitfalls, and although they were known to the parent company's board, nobody told me what they were.

To fulfill my mission, I worked very closely with the cost controller and the head of operations. The cost controller would come to me when there were supplier invoices not supported by a purchase order or by a contract that complied with the internal control system. I would put this right. I therefore had to know lots of suppliers and contributed toward making the supply chain much more transparent and sustainable. I really enjoyed the work. I relished the opportunity of meeting our local suppliers and helping them ensure their businesses were more sustainable by providing them with a contract. As part of my mission, I also spent a lot of time training local employees and explaining how things worked and why. I think they felt comfortable enough with me to come to me for advice.

At one point, the cost controller came to see me about an invoice for car fleet rental. I found the amount horrendously high compared to what I had encountered in my previous professional experience in West Africa.

On my own initiative, backed up by my local boss (the head of operations), I requested that local car rental companies reply to a tender I had put together with the help of the meet-and-greet team.

The conclusion was that my employer was renting the car fleet at around ten times the market price.

I drafted a report in April 2012 to the board of directors of the parent company to inform them of the situation. Instead of making their own investigations quietly, they sent the report back to the chairman of the local company. I did not know this at the time and was told years later about it.

From then on (May 2012), the chain of events went as follows:

- Soon after submitting my report, I had three local secretaries coming into my office one day telling me to be careful.
- A few days later, the local chairman invited me to his office for a meeting. I didn't take notes but can still remember some of his words: "Why is your husband not working?" "You will never get your business visa"; "Women should remain at home"; "This is not your country. You have no rights here."
- After this meeting I escalated the situation to my board of directors. As it happened, I was on holiday the next week, and I asked to meet with the CEO during this time. He and the parent company's chairman attended the meeting. They only focused on my business visa, did not understand the bigger picture, and certainly did not tell me they had sent my report back to the local company's chairman. This meeting confirmed that I was on my own.

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