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A Whistle-Blower

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1.3 A Whistle-Blower

As the budget coordinator in my department, I was responsible for the requisition of goods and items needed by the department. At the end of each financial year, I was responsible for determining the items that would be needed by the department in the ensuing year. This position brought me into contact with a lot of suppliers and other traders. I also enjoyed the attention of some private educational institutions because I was responsible for recommending staff for training (never mind if in some cases the courses were not relevant). In this position, I benefited from the people I dealt with who gave me gifts.

The most serious ethical problem that I encountered in my job occurred sometime in 1992. (I cannot remember the exact month, but it must have been sometime in June.) It was a case involving a group of suppliers who were to supply shoes, whistles, socks, belts and berets for the organisation's security guards numbering one hundred and twenty. The suppliers visited me at home one early morning with a big box of smoked fish and some tubers of yam. Immediately I saw them with these items, I had a feeling that there was something fishy in the pipe-line. But, in spite of my fears, I accepted their gift. Actually, I would not have accepted those foodstuffs but considering my pay at that time, there was nothing I could do but to accept them. After all, they had not told me anything, and I did not see it as a bribe, though I knew there was no "free lunch" anywhere.

When I asked them why they were bringing me gifts, they told me that they had already "seen" my boss who had agreed that the prices of the items to be purchased would be inflated by 400%; for some odd reason the price of whistles however was to be inflated by about 900%. The reason for this inflation was that, after the payment, 40% or more of the amount would be given to us — my boss and I.

The long and short of their story was that they wanted me to agree to what they had discussed with my boss. At first, I found the proposal attractive because my take-home pay was about £25,000 and the amount I was going to get from the deal was about

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#500,000. But, after the suppliers had left, I thought over the issue; for about two days I debated with myself whether to accept the deal or not. Finally, I decided not to. I was not sure of my boss: He was not a trustworthy person and I did not know what he would think of me. I feared he might get the impression that all these years I had been colluding with suppliers. At the end of three days of thinking, I went to my boss and told him about the visit, adding that I could not go along with the deal. He, however, insisted that we do it. He, indeed, went along with the scheme and the items were purchased: I was forced to sign the other documents required for payment.

I saw the transaction as unethical so I reported my boss to one of our executive directors. A committee was set up to review the purchase, but no stringent disciplinary action was taken against him. My reward for reporting the matter has been that for the past six years I have not enjoyed any promotion.

^Questions which may be useful for discussion

1. What were you reminded of in your own working experience?
2. Comment on his argument for accepting the gift. What problems can result when buyers accept gifts from suppliers?
3. Evaluate the ethics of the suppliers.
4. When you know that your boss is acting unethically how should you react? What is the difference between disloyalty and ethical whistle-blowing?
5. What title would you give to this reading?