

## “WHISTLEBLOWER”

### What's in a name? - Everything!

When it comes to whistleblowing it seems that it is all about the name or at least the label. Some time ago while looking for reasons on why it is so hard to get employment as a whistle blower, it struck me that I did not really have a clear definition of whistleblowing. So, I googled the term and connected to the Whistleblower house website, which described whistleblowers as courageous and selfless people who expose corruption and wrongdoing without regard for what may befall them. When I closed the site, I went back to my original search and one of the options that was still there on the screen, was a list of synonyms for the term whistleblower. I clicked on the link and to my surprise the site came up with no less than 69 alternatives and nick names for the noun whistleblower.

Having just read the definition on the Whistleblower site the list of synonyms that appeared was somewhat disconcerting. It started with words such as snitch, grass, tattletale, gossip, informer and also included phrases such as “snitches get stitches”. I became more and more fascinated by the bizarre juxtaposition of the whistle blower site definition and the synonym from the search I had conducted.

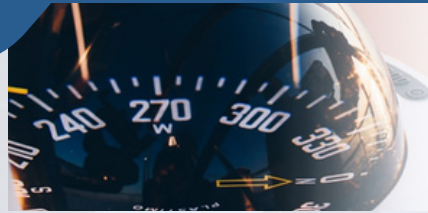
What was more troubling, was that I read the list of antonyms for Whistleblower. These were quite rightly, I thought, negative terms and the words listed included collaborator and even quisling. I remembered Vidkun Quisling from my World War II history, as being the Norwegian defence minister who sold out his countrymen and collaborated with the Nazi's during the war. He was later hanged for his actions and was clearly the very opposite of a Whistleblower.

While the term Quisling clearly means traitor, collaborator can be a far more neutral term and is really only defined by the context in which it is used. For example, a musical or theatrical collaboration can be a good thing while we can all agree that collaborating with the Nazi's in WWII was surely a bad thing. At this point though it does become very confusing when depending on which synonym or antonym you chose you can describe a whistleblower as an informer (synonym) and the opposite of whistleblower (antonym) as a collaborator!

I continued my google search and came across an article by a man named David Klein, who quoted the definition of Whistleblower from the Miriam-Webster Dictionary as: **one who reveals something covert or who informs against another.**

Klein in his article quite rightly criticises the dictionary definition for omitting and being devoid of anything which supports the courage, ethics, morality or the exposing of wrongdoing, all of which are central to whistle blowing. In reaching his conclusions, Klein like me, must have followed a similar process and sourced numerous unsavoury synonyms and derogatory terms to describe whistleblowing and concluded that as a society it seems that “we love to hate Whistleblowers.”





The reason for this state of affairs according to Klein, a notion I think we can all have some sympathy for, if not agree with, is that we have all been socialised from a young age and to a greater or lesser extent into not being telltales, and we almost instinctively take the route of sticking up against authority to protect our own.

This brings me to Klein's other point, which is related to the first, where he asks the question as to where we would be without whistleblowers. Klein believes, and those of us who have experienced living in South Africa for the last few years would have to agree, that corruption would have run riot in the corporate world and in government without the intervention of whistleblowers.

Klein therefore suggests that the English language needs a better word for whistleblowers, a term free from the negative connotations of stool pigeons, snitches, informants and schoolboy notions of not ratting out your friends. Once we clearly understand the nature and value of Whistleblowing the problem of what to call genuine "Whistleblowers" remains! It's too late to go back to the original 19th century understanding of Whistleblower, where the term was used to describe one who blew a whistle to warn people of danger or criminal activity, a really noble idea. The term we choose needs to have impact and be something that people recognise and can relate to. At the same time, paying tribute to genuine whistleblowers who have made and will continue to make a real difference.

Klein believes we should change the word Whistleblower to something like "Light Caster"- meaning someone who throws light on or exposes wrongdoing. A good suggestion but frankly I believe we need something with more gravitas and impact. Why not therefore, make use of this opportunity to get the point across really forcefully and honour a brave and courageous person like Babita Deokaran.

As a society we should be so outraged by what happened to Babita Deokaran that we never want to forget what she and many others like her have done. We would be paying tribute to Babita (and many others) by turning her name into a noun, and in so doing create a new eponym (a person, real or fictitious whose name has become identified with a particular object or activity), in the South African lexicon. In the same way the Norwegians did with the name Quisling, (albeit for completely different reasons).

As South Africans we can no longer wait for some kind of official recognition for Ms Deokaran. My fear is that given the passage of time since her murder, and as with most things in this country, officialdom will simply do nothing. Particularly now that the killers who struck a plea bargain deal, have been sentenced leaving the kingpins still very much at large and yet to be apprehended.

Whistleblowers need support from the public to change perceptions and we all need to remember the ultimate sacrifice and honour a true hero of our country. Why not therefore replace the term **Whistleblower** with **Deokaran**, defined as "one who exposes corruption and wrongdoing in corporations and government, disregarding any potential harm to themselves in the interests of creating a more just society for all."

**By Doug Armstrong**