

## ***Blowing the Whistle?***

*by Shannon Warren for publication in the June 4, 2018 Journal Record*

It was the Seventies. The country trusted journalists. After all, investigative reporters had just exposed the shame of the Watergate scandal that included break-ins, stealing of documents and the bugging of offices. It triggered the downfall of President Nixon who was caught cheating to win.

The exposure was aided by a secret informant who shared details of the scandal with *Washington Post* reporters Carl Bernstein and Bob Woodward. About thirty years later, the mole was revealed to be the associate director of the FBI: Mark Felt, the grandson of a Baptist preacher.

Was Felt a traitor or a hero? Did he betray confidences for the greater moral good? After all, he worked for a dubious leader in J. Edgar Hoover, then two other bosses whose appointments appeared to be motivated by political winds rather than experience. He allegedly lied to both of the last two, adamantly denying that he was the leak. Was he motivated because he viewed his bosses as part of the problem? Finally, was it ethical to inform the press?

My guess is that Felt was feeling powerless, having observed wrong-doing while being passed over for promotions. He might relate to modern-day whistleblowers. According to the latest Global Business Ethics Survey, at least 47% of employees have observed serious ethical misconduct in their workplaces including bribes and kickbacks, theft, sexual harassment and misuse of confidential information. Of those reporting the wrongdoing, one in three experienced retaliation, with blows coming within only three weeks of their disclosures.

Today, almost anyone can “report” the news through social media. While this may lead to a feeling of empowerment for the whistleblower, the ethical ramifications of personal privacy, benefits to society or the humanity of individuals may be disregarded in the impulsive sharing of this information. And, sometimes there are attempts to deliberately deceive and manipulate the reader or viewer.

Having said that, there are things that the public needs to know. Companies can learn from Watergate. Without a healthy culture of empowerment to identify and correct problems internally, they risk serious public scrutiny and loss of stakeholder trust. Journalists who are willing to delve into facts and report responsibly may be the only friend of the whistleblower who has no other recourse – especially when facing a corrupt organization.

*Shannon Warren is CEO of [www.okethics.org](http://www.okethics.org). On June 13, the group will host a panel of journalists, including Ted Streuli; Dick Pryor and Cherokee Ballard.*