

Blacklisting: But Who Is "Black"?

Situations can arise where someone has been significantly hurt in some way and needs support. Consider the following case.

You discover certain practices in your group and maybe elsewhere that are clearly unethical, and you complain to people in charge. As a result, many powerful people feel threatened, and someone loses his or her job. People become frightened, self-protective and start pointing fingers – and guess what – you get blacklisted for your actions even though you were only trying to stop unethical behavior.

(Blacklisting indicates that your existence is tolerated but that you are treated poorly and denied typical opportunities. It is put in place by a group or individual, and others are required to participate and enforce it, or be blacklisted themselves. It lasts as long as the initiating blacklisters say it lasts – which could be forever. It could be put in place even for a trivial reason).

You are respected in your field and doing very well. Nevertheless, the blacklisting slowly takes effect, and your career is blunted. You are demonized by the blacklisters some of whom are afraid for themselves because they have been threatened, and your reputation is seriously damaged. While some claim to offer solutions, in reality, their help is too little or too late or both, and there is very little you can do to rectify the situation. The colleagues who attempt to help you are warned that they might be blacklisted themselves and they soon give up trying to help because they are afraid. Some even join the transgressors and conspire against you behind your back. Even though you have been denied due process by the blacklisters, and the blacklisting exceeds the nature of your so-called "crime, (in this case there never was one)" you are nevertheless a victim who is suffering the retribution of being a whistleblower. Reports from many other whistleblowers (you can check the literature on this) reveal that many suffer retribution, and, in general, do not do well in their careers after whistleblowing. The reasons for this are complex and presumably involve the more twisted and puzzling aspects of human nature. Personalities vary from the generous to the sociopathic, and some of the blacklisters even seem to enjoy their role. You find yourself in a nightmare.

Comment: Blacklisting, which is practiced in some groups, includes several serious ethical failures. It's a failure to engage in "due process" which would allow a fair clarification about what happened and a clear determination if a punishment is needed. Further, the punishment must fit the crime and not be a personal whim. Also, blacklisting is a process where others are forced to participate. The ethics and laws of bullying applies to blacklisters. Also, in this process, blacklisters press us to abdicate our right to decide for ourselves how justice is served and who is guilty. We allow a

small group or individual to decide it for us; it's a failure of taking responsibility for our own actions. It can also be a failure of courage because of fear.

It is said that "sometimes blacklisting is the only way" to get justice; that may be true sometimes, but is it worth forgetting about basic human rights such as due process and having a punishment that fits the nature of the crime (if there is one)? Those can't be forgotten. Blacklisters often say that it's only a game! But a game with deadly and serious consequences is not really a game.

What do we do with the blacklisters, many of whom seem to be without a conscience? What about their arrogance where they seem to play god? Blacklisting is dangerous, denigrates everyone involved, and is most often unethical. It needs to be challenged by courageous, clear thinking and responsible individuals.

As a victim, what can you do in this particularly bleak situation? What would be a good survival strategy? You may find that you are very stressed and are not making good decisions. In general, you need to find help. There are professionals, who are trained to deal with this type of stress and its victims, and some useful suggestions for victims have been published. Strong and effective protections for whistleblowers continues to be a challenging problem and needs to be addressed further.

Someone in this position is likely to see the value of collegial ethics. Very difficult cases like this need to be studied and discussed in collegial groups. Principles and strategies need to be posed and tested.