



## Keynote address

# Corruption: A many-headed monster<sup>1</sup>

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The prevalence of corruption poses a serious threat to our nation. This paper intends to investigate, apart from the various forms of corruption and our reactions to them, the causes of and the possible cures for this evil in our society.

## 1. Prevalence of corruption

Despite the fact that corruption is universally abhorred, it afflicts traditional and modern societies, rich and poor countries, developed and underdeveloped nations.

In *traditional* (pre-colonial) Africa it was a common feature to offer gifts to people in authority or in some respectable position in society (social, political or religious). Some of these “gifts” were bribes in anticipation of a reciprocal favour. *Post-colonial Africa* is undeniably one of the worst victims of (political) corruption. Despite great assets, Africa makes slow progress because of the slow bleeding of the festering wound of corruption. According to experts corruption is the greatest and most serious disease of governments in Africa.

Corruption is more wide-spread or pervasive in some than in other countries. In the Third World it consumes from 30%-70% of the national budget! It also produces more devastating effects in some than in other nations. In the rich North it will not as easily cause people to suffer

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because of a lack of basic needs (education, medical services, housing and food) like in the poor South.

## 2. A definition of corruption

Because of the numerous forms of corruption – bribery is not the only form – it is difficult to provide a *general definition* which covers all of them. Each kind of corruption should be defined separately. For example: in the words of K. Gyekye *political corruption* may be defined as “The unsanctioned, illegal, unethical and unauthorised exploitation of one’s political or official position to use public resources or goods for personal gain that is for non-public ends”. This form of corruption implies wrong-doing against the state and generally involves reciprocities between the (public) official and another beneficiary.

Corruption, however, is not only rampant in the case of state assets, but also in business. It can also move from the public to the private sphere and vice versa.

## 3. Many forms of corruption

There have been many unsatisfactory efforts to distinguish between different types of corruption, for instance:

- *Small and big corruption*: small corruption is for instance bribery to escape a traffic fine, to buy a place on the plane, not to pay customs duty, receiving the pension of your mother who passed away long ago, etc. Big corruption can be ascribed to situations where millions or billions of rand are involved, like big arms deals, large building projects, etc.
- *Active and passive corruption*: a person tempts an official to be corrupt (active) and the official is willing to be corrupted (passive).
- *Corruption is not confined to bribery* but it includes the following: stealing public funds; false documents; disappearing of important documents; extortion; a second job – which you do in the office hours of your “first” job; using unlicensed video tapes, pirated computer software and many more.

### What then is bribery?

Bribery can be defined as payment, which may be money, favours or gifts, to influence a decision. Bribery takes place, *inter alia*, to receive favours in turn; facilitate fast delivery of goods; gain an unfair advantage; avoid legal prosecution or to supply substandard products or services.

The following comparison further clarifies what bribery implies: *bribery*: the giver initiates the corruption; *extortion*: the receiver initiates

corruption; *gifts*: a legal and healthy cultural habit for building personal relationships and expressing gratitude; *tipping*: an expected reward above normal wages for a job well performed.

Bribery can be regarded as wrong because it creates an unjust advantage, distorts justice, creates expectations and binds the receiver to the giver's agenda. Furthermore, it prevents normal authority structures, it maintains the perverted structure of extortion, and provides only a short-term solution for a personal need. Bribery also benefits the rich and disadvantages the vulnerable and poor and provides no motivation for a person to do what he should do anyway.

Some causes for bribery are the following: low wages – people cannot survive; limited resources and shortages; the lack of an open market; cultural reasons (gift-giving) and lastly the attitude of “everyone has to do it – to get something done” or “it is necessary for business”.

The only solution is: Never pay nor accept bribes, ever!

#### • **Political corruption**

The following are well-known examples of political corruption: graft, fraud, nepotism, kickbacks, favouritism, misappropriation of public funds or goods. Instances of political corruption may include the following situations:

- A head of state who stealthily and fraudently takes huge sums of money from the state and deposits them in foreign banks.
- A public official who receives a bribe from a prospective employee to ensure that he be given a job.
- An official who favours a less-qualified relative for a position, rejecting the candidate with better credentials.
- A policeman who abandons the charge against an arrested person after receiving a bribe.
- A customs official who illegally reduces customs duties.
- A clerk who deliberately miscalculates the tax of a rich business man in return for some kickbacks.
- A magistrate or judge who prevents the course of justice in favour of an individual who offers him a bribe.

From this list it is clear that (political) corruption can infect a whole society – from the lowest to its highest ranks.

#### • **Categorising corruption**

From the above examples it is also evident that because corruption has so many faces, it is extremely difficult to divide these examples into watertight categories. Apart from political and business (economic)

corruption it will be possible to mention the following kinds of corruption: emotional, lingual, social, aesthetic, juridical, moral and even religious corruption.

#### 4. Possible (wrong) reactions to corruption

The following incorrect reactions to corruption are very common today:

- “*Everyone does it*” (eg. bribing a traffic officer). The assumptions in this case are that something is not wrong if everyone else does it. Or: Even if I stop doing it, it will not make any difference.
- “*This is a minor offence*” (eg. cheating on income tax). The assumption in this instance is that a major offence is of such magnitude that a minor offence has to be redefined as a non-offense.
- “*The biggest crooks are in government*” (usually used to justify shady business deals). The underlying assumptions are the following: Because the people in authority are the foremost law-breakers, then there is effectively no law and by definition no law-breaking. And: One might just as well keep the money (income tax) than to hand it over to thieves.
- “*It’s a stupid rule anyway*” (eg. lying about your age to get a driver’s licence earlier than allowed). The assumption is: I have the right to decide which rules are sensible and which not – and to disregard the latter.
- “*I have no choice*” (eg. in obtaining necessary services). The assumption behind this reaction will be more or less the following: Under ideal circumstances I would obey this rule or law, but obedience to this law will cause unacceptable inconvenience and suffering. My need therefore justifies it to make an exception.
- “*I was treated unjustly*” (eg. I was not paid a fair salary, therefore I may help myself).
- “*I did it for a higher purpose*” (eg. if I did not steal, my children would have died of hunger). This is the well-known argument that the end justifies (any) means.
- “*He is a bad guy*” – *therefore my deed is not wrong*. By blaming others, portraying them as enemies or as bad (*ad hominem*-argument) you are projecting guilt away from yourself.
- “*I did not steal from a person, but from the (impersonal) state*”. Personal distance makes it easier to be corrupt. Like the father who reprimanded his son who stole a pen at school, because he (the father) could have “taken” ten pens from his workplace.

- “*It is politically the correct thing to do*”. This implies that something may not be judged even if it is not correct. Examples are that in the past the apartheid ideology de-activated the conscience of the whites, while today some blacks are hypersensitive to their own shortcomings. If a white says that corruption has increased since 1994, it will therefore be vigorously denied (statistics questioned) and the speaker blamed of racism.

The above are only a few wrong reactions to corruption.

What could the correct answer be? Is it, for instance, correct to argue that, because everyone does it, oneself may also be involved in corruption? What are the deeper reasons for this wrong argument? The false belief that the majority decides on what is right and wrong? Group pressure? Fear to blow the whistle? An easy way of evading personal responsibility?

## 5. The causes of corruption

### **The political systems of the state**

As possible examples the following can be listed:

- **The way a political system operates**

When a government is too soft on bigtime tax evaders, too cozily tolerant of kleptocrats, unable to enforce its own laws. Or the successful candidate in an election has to reciprocate with appropriate “rewards” (jobs, contracts, etc.) to cronies, members of his/her own family or ethnic group.

- **Weak political leadership**

The inability to persecute wrongdoing and clap to jail those who happen to be close to the centre of power. Because leaders are dishonest themselves, they have compromised their own integrity and moral authority and cannot discipline others, but rather infect them with the virus of corruption. As leaders set the moral tone of society, a nation will not rise above the level of those who have authority over them.

- **A certain perception of the state**

Even in post-independence Africa the state is still regarded as an alien institution – from which one should try to get as much as possible without getting in trouble.

## **Socio-cultural causes**

Both individualist and communalist societies are prone to corruption. At first glance we may expect that individualistic (Western) societies are more vulnerable to corruption. Different authors, however, confirm that communitarian (African) societies are just as easily infected and in fact often riddled with even more frequent and scandalous levels of corruption. Communalism seems unable to make a distinction between private and public funds. Examples in traditional African culture are the following:

- A person has the onerous duty to care not only for himself, his wife and children, but for all his relatives and kinship relations (tribalism).
- The responsibility to find jobs for extended family leads to nepotism.
- The traditional system of the exchange of gifts, especially to elders, public officials and other “big men” results in bribery.

## **Economic reasons**

The argument is often heard that Africans are corrupt because Africa is poor. Africa is poor indeed. On average 45%-50% of sub-Saharan Africans live below the poverty line – a much higher proportion than in any region of the world, except South Asia. An estimated 40% Africans live on less than 1 US dollar a day. Also the extent of poverty – that is how far incomes fall below the poverty line – is greater in sub-Saharan Africa than elsewhere in the world. But the presumption that the eradication of inequality (and the installation of equality) will help eradicate corruption has to be questioned.

Poverty definitely plays a role, but more wealth will not change the nature of the individual human heart – even of the poor. It is not the victims of corruption who are the most corrupt because they do not have access to the centres of power. Corruption also occurs in very wealthy countries and among the financially well-off top public officials of poor countries (the so-called “untouchables”).

It is, however, not only public officials who have to be blamed, but also the corrupt behaviour of other members of society tempting them into corruption.

## **Legal causes**

This implies a lack of an adequate legal and institutional framework or controls that make our laws unenforceable and the rendering of justice impossible, like inadequate laws; inadequate institutional checks; in-

effective law enforcement agents and processes; inadequate legal sanctions against culprits and weak civil service regulations.

### **Black and white racism as cause**

In this case the one group tends to put the other in an unfavourable light. In the past white racism led to many forms of “racial” discrimination which is a form of corruption. At present we should not close our eyes to reverse black racism in some forms of unfair affirmative action.

### **External causes may be the following:**

- Political intervention from the West in Africa (eg. coups).
- Economic exploitation by the West (eg. debt burdens).
- Africans imitating the ostentious life-style of the West (eg. expensive houses and cars – “the Mabenzi-club”).

### **Decline of moral standards**

In the arsenal of techniques advocated for fighting corruption the ethical causes are often ignored or are mentioned only in passing – as if they are peripheral to the phenomenon. To my mind a more fundamental cause (than the socio-economic-political) is the lack of moral character of both officials and members of public who seek favours. My first justification for this statement is that mere knowledge will not necessarily solve the problem. Corrupt people *know* they are doing wrong – that is why they are not doing it openly.

The second justification is that political systems may improve, economic situations may become better (eg. increased salaries), legal institutions updated (eg. strict law enforcement and severe punishment), but it will merely reduce corruption, its effects will only be limited. Corrupt officials will still take advantage of existing loopholes. People cannot be compelled to be honest. No law is fail-safe against human rot. Therefore the therapies usually prescribed by sociologists, politicians and economists are not enough. Moral corruption lies at the core of all other kinds of corruption. To counteract it, we have to recover virtues like responsibility, integrity and honesty to replace graft, greed, avarice, etc.

Two false – and dangerous – distinctions require our attention: the one between private and public and the other between religion and morality.

### **The separation between private and public morality**

Moral issues (not only about sex) involving government officials are considered non-issues, because the common line of thought is that the private moral proclivities of leaders have nothing to do with their public

function. An example is the horrid public statement of the Filipino president a week after US president Bill Clinton had publicly confessed his inappropriate relationship with Monica Lewinsky: “Clinton and I have sex scandals – he has the scandals and I just have sex”. Private and public morality is, however, an artificial dichotomy put up conveniently by those who do not wish to be accountable to others for their personal behaviour. A morally upright person is moral – in the bedroom and in the boardroom. Moral principles are not jackets to put on or to take off depending on the weather (occasion).

### **The separation between religion and morality**

This phenomenon is as old as the history of Israel in the Old Testament. Israel had little trouble with the cultic aspects of God’s law, like offering sacrifices or celebrating feasts. But they had difficulties with those aspects of the law that had to do with day-to-day life, like doing justice to one’s neighbour and using honest scales in business. Similarly we today lack an ethical dimension in our religious behaviour. No matter which religion we confess, it is a split-level Christianity, Islam etc., a kind of schizophrenia. We still think – like old Israel – that religious rituals could substitute for simple obedience to the ethical demands of the law. This is something which already the Old Testament prophets railed against (Isaiah 1:11-17, Micah 6:8). I call this a secular way of life: to live as if God and his laws do not matter – especially in public life.

## **6. The consequences of corruption**

As in the case of the causal factors the consequences are farreaching:

- Greatly gifted countries (in terms of natural and human resources) fail miserably and become derelict. As righteousness makes a nation, corruption can break a whole nation.
- The effects of corruption are more disastrous among poorer nations – ordinary people suffer.
- Corruption has a tendency to spread rapidly and grows in intensity because of its strong lure.
- When it has infected a whole society (its moral fabric has collapsed), it is very, very difficult to fight. People who fight against it may not only pay with their jobs, but also with their lives.
- This monster, cancer or virus has many consequences (economic, political, social) and there is a close relation between them. A country economically ruined by corruption cannot survive politically or socially or vice versa.
- Corruption, we should realise, is not to the advantage of anybody.

## 7. Prevention and elimination of corruption

I will limit myself to ethical/moral prevention only.

Different viewpoints about the field of ethics are occasionally stated, inter alia the following: ethics should study, for instance, practical life; humanity (its character, customs, behaviour, virtues, duties and pleasures); the principles/values/norms that govern human behaviour/ choices to decide what is good or bad; relationships between people or more specific: only relationships of love between people. To my mind all these definitions of the field of ethics are too broad. It may result in an imperialistic ethics, the moralisation of the whole of life. Its field of study needs to be clearly demarcated or specified.

Love is a fundamental/central commandment. We should love one another (positive) and should not do to others what we would not want them to do to us (negative). Love, however, acquires different forms in different relationships, like truth (marriage), care (family), justice (politics) and stewardship (economics).

### **The ethical side of love relationships**

Ethical *values* can be expressed in words like truth, reliability, genuineness, integrity, loyalty, respect, honesty, scrupulousness, solidarity, faithfulness, steadfastness, trustworthiness, dependability, reliability, dedicatedness, etc. Ethical *relationships* are relationships in which these words are the key concepts. The ethical *norm* will therefore be that one should be true, loyal, honest, etc. in one's dealings with others. The *science of ethics* should study specific human relationships which either comply to these norms (ethically good behaviour) or which do not comply, like false, disloyal, unreliable, untrustful, dishonest conduct (the ethically bad). Some human relationships, like friendship and marriage, are *ethically qualified*. All other social relationships, are differently qualified (a business is economically qualified), but they all have an ethical/moral *aspect or facet*.

### **Business: definitions**

A business enterprise does not simply imply a workplace where efficient means of production are fused together in order to make a profit in the market. My attempt at a broader definition is that a business is an independent community of people (management and workers) that, in reciprocal co-operation and with the aid of available means at fair remuneration, provide meaningful labour as well as rendering goods and services to the community at reasonable prices.

A business reveals many *internal* and *external* human relationships: between management and employees; between employees mutually; between the business and its clients, rivals, shareholders, suppliers, consumers; between business and government; between business and other societal relationships, such as the marriages and families of employees; between business itself and its natural environment (raw materials, etc.) and between business and the international (global) markets. All these relationships reveal an ethical or moral facet.

## **Business ethics**

Business ethics is not merely concerned with skills, methods, efficiency and results. Daily businesses have to make choices – sometimes very difficult ones. This cannot be done without clear norms, principles or values. Not only economic, but also other norms like the ethical have to be applied. (A business is not ethically *qualified*, but has an ethical *facet*.) We should *simultaneously* realise *all* these norms, because norms cannot be separated from one another, but form a unity. The application of ethical norms is therefore not simply an afterthought (when business can afford it) or a little salve for one's conscience. Compliance with the juridical norm of justice may sometimes be even more important in business than profit.

Stewardship (the norm for economics) is about *service* in the first place. It should play a decisive role in inter alia the following spheres: our vision and mission statements, our code of conduct, our labour relations, profit policy, marketing strategies, advertising and promotion activities and our so-called social responsibility.

## **Where do we get these ethical norms from?**

One of the main reasons for the “moral vacuum” that presently threatens South Africa (Pres. Mbeki) is that we have lost the firm ground of the religious and worldviewish foundations of our values. We need a “moral revolution”, that is, a radical and fundamental change. Two examples of such a moral revolution include the following:

- **Muhammed in the Quran**

In pre-Islamic Arabia virtues like generosity and hospitality existed, but they were narrowly conceived – they did not extend beyond the confines of the own tribe or kinship. Muhammed extended them to *all* people. He eliminated retaliation and replaced it with forgiveness and compassion.

- **Christ in the Bible**

He also replaced the old Judaic morality of vengeance, retribution (“an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth”) and other expressions of hatred towards one's enemies with *universal* love, mercy and forgiveness. A

concept like loving your friends and family and hating your enemy (like other tribes) was replaced by something substantially new: loving your enemies and even praying for your persecutors. The *old* morality of doing good to someone in expectation of a good return, was replaced by a *new* morality of doing good to *everybody for its own sake*, that is without expecting something in return.

### **Why is it so difficult to apply these norms?**

*Knowledge* of the correct norms does not automatically lead to *acting* accordingly. Being *rational* is different from being *moral*. Therefore morality (in the sense of moral behaviour) cannot be legislated. (Especially if those who have to enforce the moral laws are corrupt themselves.) What is needed is the will, a commitment motivated by our conscience. But sometimes people really have problems to *apply* the moral norms in concrete situations and should therefore be assisted in doing so.

### **8. A few practical hints**

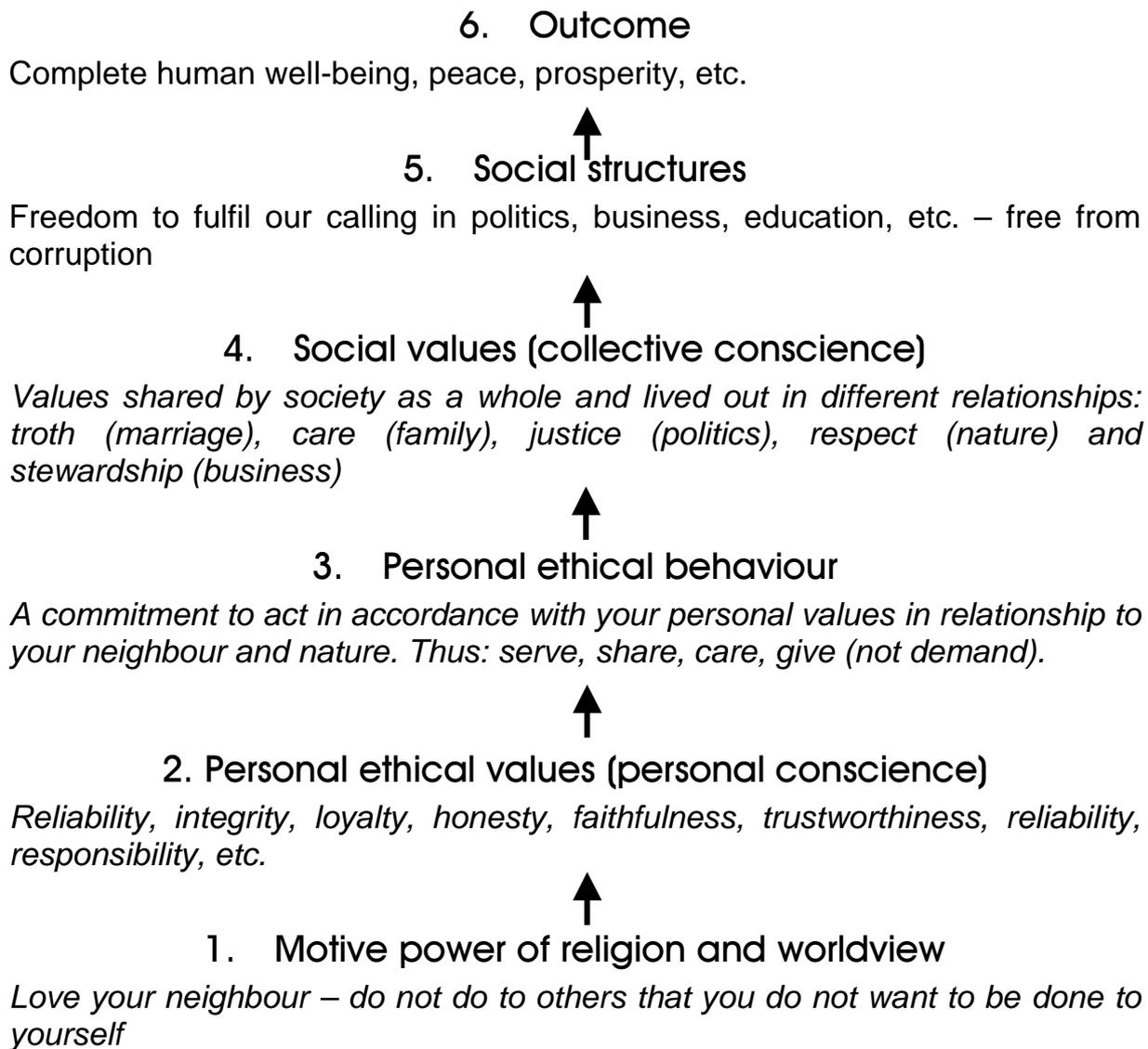
Only a few practical steps to prevent or eradicate corruption will be mentioned. One of them, viz. whistle blowing will then be discussed in more detail.

To challenge the many-headed monster of corruption we need a comprehensive approach:

- *Individual integrity*: eg. refuse to give or accept bribes. However, because the monster is so big, individual action will not be sufficient.
- *Get leaders on board*: utilize proofs of integrity among people in power.
- *Start with small islands of integrity* which will gradually (like yeast) influence society.
- *Careful selection, proper training and the fair remuneration of civil servants* and business leaders can counteract corruption among officials.
- *A free press* – to investigate and report corruption.
- *National anti-corruption campaigns* involving civil society as a whole (schools, universities, the media, etc.) is a must. Anonymous reporting (whistle blowing) at easy accessible offices and immediate prosecution of culprits are important. Big business has to sign agreements promising not to be involved in corruption. (An example is Hong Kong where 3000 people were contracted at a cost of R600 million). An important contact address for advice is: Transparency S.A., P.O. Box 32065, Braamfontein 2017 (telephone: 011-4034331).

- *Regional and international action:* For instance SADEC countries and Transparency International; the coalition against corruption in international business transactions. Head office: Heylstrasse 33, Berlin D-10825, Germany.

*The following diagram offers a summary: the positive power of religion and worldview can bring about human well-being, peace and prosperity.*



### **Whistle blowing**

Let us, in conclusion, have a look at this method of counteracting corruption in more detail. Whistle blowing implies the deliberate leaking of information about injustice, illegal conduct, unethical practices (eg. preferential treatment, sexual favours, theft, unsafe products or other kinds of corruption) that has occurred or is going to happen.

Forms of whistle blowing are the following: Anonymous or openly; internal: from *inside* the organisation to the outside (media, police, etc.).

This method is preferred above external whistle blowing: initiated from *outside* the organisation (eg. the media). In this case two subtypes can be distinguished, viz. somebody from *inside* leaks the information or somebody from *outside* (eg. an investigating journalist) reports about corruption.

Wrong and correct motifs for whistle blowing should be clearly distinguished. Wrong whistleblowing is in essence egoistic, like revenge, own advantage or financial gain, ambition for power or need of acception – all causing harm. Correct motives have a positive aim, are directed at the wellbeing of an organisation, its co-workers and the public. Correct motives are also directed at the prevention of (further) corruption.

Stumbling blocks (in the way of internal whistle blowing) may be the following: When confidentiality is overemphasized, for instance absolute loyalty towards one's organisation – which results in the cover-up of corruption; group pressure not to blow the whistle; a need to be accepted by management, to be popular among one's own group; rationalisation – transgression of one's own values explained away, and ideological blindness: the twisting of values, no distinction between right and wrong, no feeling of guilt.

Important conditions to be considered are the following:

- Whistle blowing should be the last resort – after trying other ways.
- Only serious cases of corruption should be reported.
- Correct motives (eg. not negative but positive intentions) should be the reason to blow the whistle.
- Correct procedures should be followed.
- If possible, there should be certainty about facts – it should not merely be based on suspicions.
- One should be prepared to lose (eg. willing to make sacrifices, like being unpopular) to gain something of greater importance for others.
- If your own value system differs radically from that of the organisation, it may be better to resign than to try whistle blowing.
- Internal whistle blowing should be preferred to external whistle blowing.

Sometimes it can be very difficult to decide which course should be taken when blowing the whistle, because it may have both bad and beneficial results.

Negative effects may be the following: The whistle blower is either portrayed as disloyal, a traitor, a villain or as loyal, brave, a hero. She/he is rejected by colleagues and friends. Retaliation by his/her employer

may occur, like demotion, questioning of his motives, attacking of his character (emotional instability and unreliability, trouble maker, making issues about nothing, looking for publicity, etc.), harrassment of family and friends, discredited with loss of his good name and reputation. The organisation's image and business may also be ruined.

Positive effects can, however, be the improvement of individuals' conduct in a company and the organisation as a whole. It is therefore of vital importance to determine as far as possible beforehand whether the reaction will be positive or negative.

Possible reactions to whistle blowing include the following: Negative reactions like denial, shifting the blame, excuses, justification and discrediting the whistle blower. Positive reactions can be acknowledgement, introspection, self-evaluation and correcting injustice. In the latter case remedial action will follow, like the protection of the whistle blower; protection of the witnesses; correcting the wrongs; the creation of a better ethical climate and the taking of measures to prevent the future need for whistle blowing.

As prevention is always better than the treatment of an illness, the following measures can be taken:

- Organisational and structural changes that make external whistle blowing unnecessary.
- Facilitating internal whistle blowing by eg. a confidential questionnaire, hot lines, an open-door policy, an ombudsman, an ethical committee and guaranteed protection of whistle blowers.
- Strict disciplinary measures against corruption.
- Strengthening personal ethical consciences.
- The creation of a collective ethical conscience, an ethical climate, and an ethical code – facets that are difficult but very important.
- Assisting people to bridge the gap between ethical values and daily practice in the workplace.

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**Key concepts:**

bribery

business ethics

corruption: manifestations of, causes, prevention

**Kernbegrippe:**

korrupsie: manifestasie, oorsake, voorkoming

omkoperij

sake-etiek