

Trust @Work:  
*Is the American  
Workplace Facing  
an Ethical Crisis?*

Survey Findings



**In our 30 years of practice, we have seen hundreds of cases of workplace misconduct.** The big names grab headlines, but some of the most egregious cases are quieter, and come from a profits-before-people culture that emboldens bad actors. The absence of an ethical culture is particularly dangerous during periods of economic uncertainty, when employees are less likely to speak up. Unfortunately, every day in our law practice we see that when good people check out, bad people check in.

To assess the state of workplace ethics today, we surveyed more than 1,000 Americans. This report, *Trust @Work: Is the American Workplace Facing an Ethical Crisis?*, examines key indicators of workplace health, including ethical culture, commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI), and employees' willingness to report misconduct.

The results reveal clear warning signs. While 22% of respondents said they have witnessed unethical or illegal conduct at work, 33% reported that fear of consequences would prevent them from reporting issues at work. We also found a stark disconnect between employer priorities and

employee values. Although 73% of Americans believe DEI should be a workplace priority, 28% say their employers don't treat it as one. More troubling still, more than one in five respondents felt pressure to compromise their ethical standards.

These findings underscore the urgent need for stronger ethical leadership, credible anti-retaliation protections, and sustained commitment to DEI. Without meaningful reform, employers face growing legal risk, eroding trust, and reputational harm that threaten customers, investors, and the public at large.

We must do better. And until we do, we believe whistleblowers are the answer.



**Tammy Marzigliano**  
Co-Chair,  
Whistleblower &  
Retaliation Practice



**Dave Jochowitz**  
Co-Chair,  
Whistleblower &  
Retaliation Practice

*When one-third of those surveyed said the fear of negative consequences would prevent them from reporting issues at work...Houston, we've got a big problem.*

**Tammy Marzigliano**, Partner & Co-Chair, Whistleblower & Retaliation Practice

---

## When DEI Programs Disappear, Discrimination Thrives

DEI values, hiring practices, and programs are among the most visible signs of a healthy workplace. DEI efforts reflect how an organization treats people in practice—not just what it says in an employee manual. A workplace where all people can speak openly without fear of ridicule, retaliation, or exclusion is one that values integrity and respect.

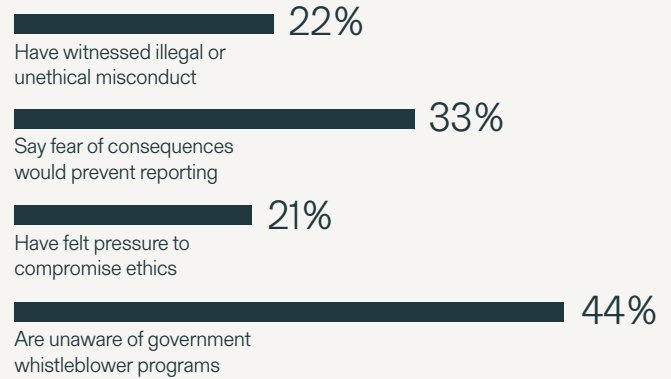
DEI is not separate from corporate ethics; it is one of its clearest expressions. And Americans want that expression. In our survey, 73% of Americans feel DEI should be a priority with women, unsurprisingly, seven points higher than men. Age is a notable factor, with 82% of employees ages 35-44 viewing DEI as a priority as compared with 59% of those ages 55-64.

Unfortunately, Americans' values are not in sync with their work experience. More than one-quarter (28%) of respondents feel DEI is not a priority for their employer.

Looking ahead, given the priorities of younger cohorts, a more equitable, safe, and inclusive workplace appears to be on the horizon.

### The Big Picture: A Snapshot of Workplace Ethics and Reporting

Percentage of Americans Who:



*Because companies depend on internal accountability, DEI practices are essential to effective compliance, risk management, and whistleblower protection.*

---

## Does Culture Matter?

Corporate culture impacts commercial success, particularly across performance, risk, reputation, and employee behavior. In that regard, it is reassuring that 76% of those surveyed feel that their workplace promotes an ethical culture. However, when we asked respondents if they have ever felt their employer pressured them to compromise their ethical standards, 21% said yes, a figure that rises to 26% of men.

Our survey revealed demographic disparities. Nearly one-third (30%) of Black respondents report feeling pressured to compromise ethical standards compared to 20% of whites. Age, too, is a factor. Of the respondents who are 65 or older a mere 5% feel pressure to compromise their ethics. This stands in stark contrast to the 24% of those between the ages of 35-44 who also reported feeling such pressure.

*18% of respondents couldn't say whether their work environment promotes an ethical culture.*

The contradictions are puzzling.

Nevertheless, there is a great opportunity to improve the work environment by clearly reinforcing the importance of ethics, transparency and integrity—particularly in the tone set by leadership.

### Take it from the Top: Culture Matters

According to the Society for Human Resource Management, the percentage of Chief Human Resource Officers focusing on workplace culture in 2026 has more than doubled since 2025, underscoring its importance to the employee experience.

## Communication & Fear

While transparency and openness are critical, the data suggests employers just aren't getting it. Overall, 13% of those surveyed don't agree that their employer communicates honestly and openly. What's worrisome is that this figure rises to 21% for those aged 55-64, a cohort that may represent the most senior employees with the greatest insight into employers' behavior. There is a significant percentage of respondents, including 18% of women, who neither agree nor disagree that their employer communicates with honesty and openness. Have employees checked-out? What are the consequences of ambivalence?

When employees feel secure, they're more likely to speak up about problems and stay engaged. When they don't, misconduct can thrive. We asked if employees felt comfortable voicing concerns or dissenting opinions without fear of retaliation. One in 10 of all respondents don't, a figure that rises to 15% for respondents in both the 45-54 and 55-64 age groups. Looking at the data conversely, 73% of those surveyed,

*When workers feel they cannot safely report dangers, organizations lose their most valuable early-warning system—the frontline employees who see problems first.*

and 68% of women, feel comfortable voicing concerns or dissent. Again, the equivocacy is unsettling. Seventeen percent overall, and 21% of women, couldn't say whether they feel comfortable sharing concerns or dissent. Based on our experience, if employees aren't sure they can openly communicate, it may well be a workplace at risk.

The stakes are even higher, and the survey responses are disquieting, when it comes to reporting *actual* unethical or illegal conduct. Speaking up about misconduct is both a responsibility and a service to the organization, not a betrayal. However, instead of feeling emboldened, data suggests that a large number of employees feel uncomfortable with such a report. Indeed, while 22% of respondents have witnessed or are aware of illegal or unethical conduct at work, just under three-quarters (73%) would feel comfortable reporting it to management. That figure drops to 68% for women. Uncertainty is a barometer to watch carefully. When 16% of Americans are neither comfortable nor uncomfortable—rising to 19% of women—employers may set the stage for silent bystanders.

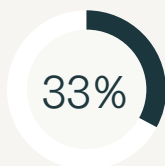
We took our research one step further to examine the root cause of employees' discomfort. This revealed one of the most concerning spots in the survey. We asked if the fear of negative consequences would prevent the reporting of issues of any sort.

# 23%

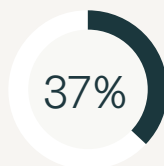
Our findings track the Institute of Business Ethics' 2024 Survey, which noted that 23% of employees globally said they were aware of illegal or unethical conduct at their workplace in the past year.

## Fear of Repercussions Holds Some Employees Back

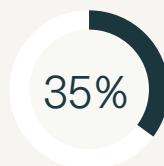
Percent who say that fear of negative consequences would prevent them from reporting issues at work:



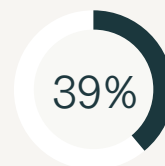
All Respondents



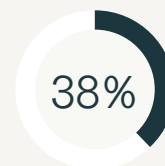
Respondents from the Northeast



Black Respondents



Hispanic Respondents



Respondents with Children in the Household

## Where Can Employees Turn?

Workplaces with clear reporting channels, anti-retaliation policies, and consistent enforcement build trust in leadership. But when reporting internally feels unsafe or ineffective, government whistleblower programs offer critical protection. These programs exist precisely because internal systems often fail.

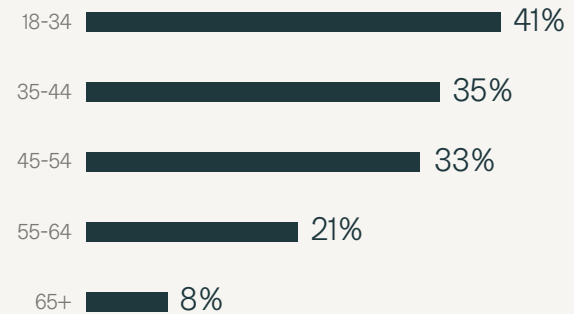
At their core, government whistleblower programs restore the balance of workplace power. Recognizing that individual employees often stand alone against large institutions, these programs provide legal protection, confidentiality, and financial safeguards to make speaking up possible.

So what happens when people don't know about the very programs that can protect them from retaliation and incentivize reporting?

We asked if individuals were aware of government programs such as the SEC Whistleblower Program that offer protection against retaliation and significant financial rewards for reporting corporate fraud. More than four out of 10 say they are unaware of such programs, rising to 48% of women surveyed. The data also revealed that while nearly 63% of those ages 35-44 are aware of government whistleblower programs, 35% of the same cohort said that the fear of negative consequences would prevent them from reporting misconduct.

### Fear & Reporting: The Age Factor

Percent Who Say Fear of Negative Consequences Would Prevent the Reporting of Workplace Issues:



**5x** Young workers are more than 5x as likely to fear reporting than the most senior workers.

# 75%

According to the SEC's Annual Report to Congress, of the current or former insiders who received whistleblower awards in FY 2021, more than 75% raised their concerns internally before going to the Commission, or understood that a supervisor or relevant compliance personnel knew of the violations.

## Why Do Corporate Whistleblowers Turn to the Government?

- Anonymity.** Many programs—such as the SEC and Commodity Futures Trading Commission whistleblower programs—allow individuals to report anonymously when represented by a lawyer. This reduces the fear of being identified and targeted.
- Employment Protections.** Federal whistleblower laws prohibit employers from firing, demoting, harassing, or otherwise retaliating against employees for reporting illegal conduct. With many government whistleblower programs, protections include the right to sue in federal court for reinstatement, double back pay with interest, and attorneys' fees and other litigation costs.
- Law Enforcement is a Powerful Ally.** Through government whistleblower programs, individuals gain access to a formidable advocate. Instead of relying on company leadership to police itself, whistleblowers can report directly to a government agency with the authority to investigate and enforce the law.
- Monetary Awards.** Many programs, including those administered by the SEC, CFTC, and Department of Justice, offer significant monetary awards when whistleblower information leads to a successful enforcement action. The SEC alone has paid whistleblowers more than \$2.2 billion.
- Validation.** Too often, whistleblowers are referred to as "rats" and "snitches." Government action rewrites that narrative, lending legitimacy to employees' reports of corporate wrongdoing.

# Misconduct at Work: The Witnesses

Survey results indicate that 22% of workers have either directly witnessed or otherwise become aware of illegal or unethical conduct. The breakdown by various population segments is concerning. There are high concentrations of “witnesses” among males (25%), residents of the Northeast (26%) and among Black Americans (36%). And while so many would not report misconduct fearing the consequences, more than one-quarter (27%) know of another employee who has. Nearly one-third of men (31%) and 37% of all Black respondents are aware of another employee reporting misconduct in the workplace. We hope that this behavior will become the standard.

## Racial Disparities Across Key Metrics

Percent of Respondents Who:

	Black	Hispanic	White
Have witnessed or become aware of misconduct	36%	18%	20%
Say fear would prevent reporting issues	35%	39%	30%
Have felt pressure to compromise ethical standards	30%	20%	20%
Say DEI should be a workplace priority	87%	77%	67%
Trust leadership to act in employees' best interests	89%	82%	79%

## Trust

In our efforts to assess workplace health from multiple angles, we asked how much those surveyed trust their employer to take complaints of misconduct seriously, regardless of who is involved. It is encouraging that 95% of respondents trust their employers to take reports of misconduct seriously! That said, homing in on specific populations reveals worrying findings. For example, among those ages 55-64—who may be among the longest tenured employees—one in 10 don't trust their employers to take complaints seriously. While employees may believe employers would take reports seriously, many are still afraid of reporting.

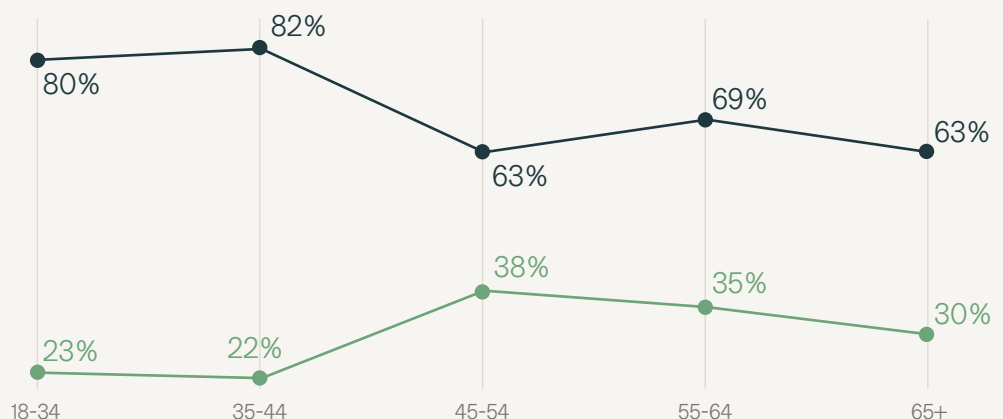
Looking at it from another angle, we asked how much American workers trust company leadership to act in the best interests of their employees. Fifteen percent of women reported having very little trust that their bosses act in employees' best interests. This climbed to 18% when looking at those in the 55-64 age group, a population that might have the greatest insight into company conduct.

We also noted a regional disparity. A full one-fifth of respondents from the Northeast have very little trust compared to 13% of those from the Midwest, 11% from the South, and 11% from the West.

## The Importance of Diversity in the Workplace: An Age Comparison

Percent of Respondents Who Say:

- DEI should be a priority in the workplace
- DEI is NOT a priority for my employer



## Ethics at Work: A Regional Comparison

	Percent of Respondents Who:			
	Northeast	Midwest	South	West
Have witnessed illegal or unethical conduct	26%	23%	19%	25%
Fear repercussions would prevent reporting	37%	31%	31%	35%
Have felt pressure to compromise ethics	25%	22%	18%	22%

## Concluding Thoughts: A Great Divide

We conclude with our gating question: Is the American workplace facing an ethical crisis? In many respects, we believe it is.

We probed the viewpoints of American workers on key indicators of workplace ethics and found a significant gap between employees' awareness of wrongdoing and their willingness or ability to raise concerns through formal channels. Most alarming was the degree to which employees felt pressure to compromise their ethical standards.

In all, the survey results underscore the need for organizations to strengthen ethical leadership, reinforce credible anti-retaliation protections, demonstrate sustained commitment to DEI, and encourage the reporting of misconduct at every level. Without meaningful reforms, employers risk increased legal and regulatory exposure, diminished employee trust, and serious reputational harm. Ultimately, this will impact customers, investors, and the public at large.

We must do better. And we can.

*This survey was conducted in November 2025 by Big Village Insights among 1,051 employed U.S. adults (full- or part-time). The sample is weighted by age, sex, geographic region, race, and education. External data referenced in this report come from sources with different methodologies and are offered for context only. Big Village is a member of the Insights Association and ESOMAR (the European Society for Opinion and Marketing Research) and adheres to industry ethics and best practices.*