Barriers to a Speak-Up Culture and the Risks of a Silent Workforce:
A Report from ECI's Global Business Ethics Survey®

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

A workplace in which employees do not speak up is a workplace in danger.
The most recent iteration of Ethics & Compliance Initiative's (ECI) Global Business Ethics Survey® (GBES®) provides critical insights that ethics & compliance (E&C) practitioners can use to identify emerging challenges and barriers to a strong speak-up culture. Most concerning among the findings is that only 8%[1] of the 75,000+ employees surveyed think that they work in a strong speak-up culture. This report examines one contributing factor to this statistic: management behaviors are a powerful barrier to speaking up.

The GBES data show management suppression of speaking up does not stem from ignorance or lack of attention — rather, management globally is perceived as signaling that it prefers to remain silent about problems and chastise others if something goes wrong.

Unfortunately, management's suppression of speaking up is a double-edged sword: when managers suppress reporting, the data show that they may simultaneously be encouraging or enabling misconduct and wrongdoing throughout the workforce.

In light of these findings, this report also contains several recommendations for leaders regarding accountability practices, transparent communication and an idea for shifting an organization's approach to speaking up.

Workplaces with strong speak-up cultures are more likely to have workforces that operate with confidence because employees' voices are valued, heard and taken seriously. Conversely, weak speak-up cultures tend to have workforces that operate in fear, with doubt about the confidentiality of their reports, and that keep their concerns quiet for fear of retaliation.

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[1] This report discusses data collected from employees in 42 countries. Results in the report are the global median of the 42 countries. See Methodology for more information.

Strong speak-up cultures are the exception — not the norm.

Strong speak-up cultures,[2] despite being foundational to any E&C program that is endeavoring to make real change in an organization, are decidedly uncommon.
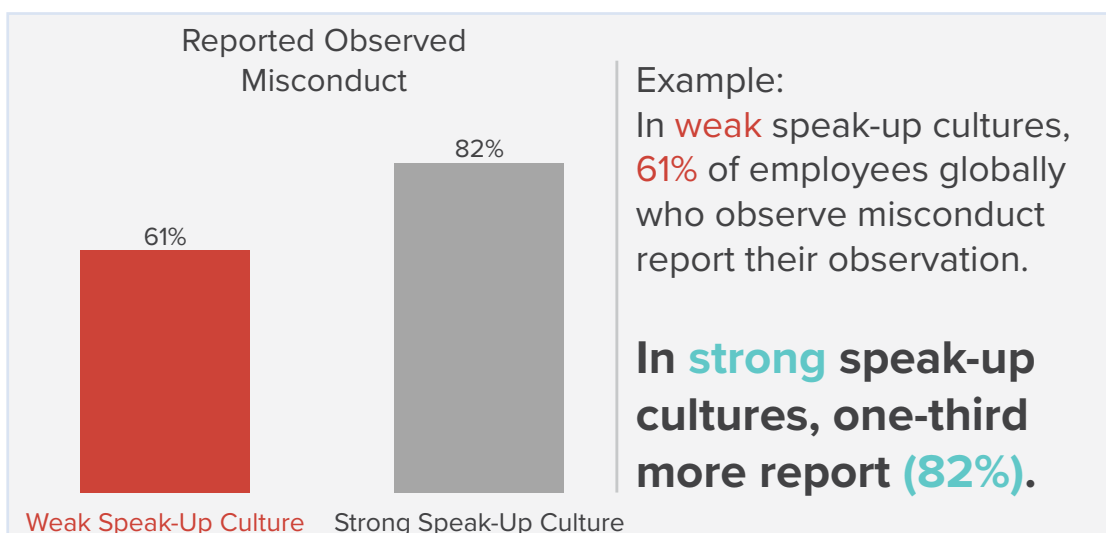
The most recent GBES contained metrics exploring how likely an employee is to a) speak up about misconduct and b) believe that their organization welcomes and practices open communication.

The findings are bleak: **only 8% of employees globally perceive their workplaces as having a strong speak-up culture.**

Far more employees (53%) work in an environment with a weak or weak-leaning speak-up culture.

Speak-Up Culture Strength

Strong
8%

Weak
15%

Strong-Leaning
39%

Weak-Leaning
38%
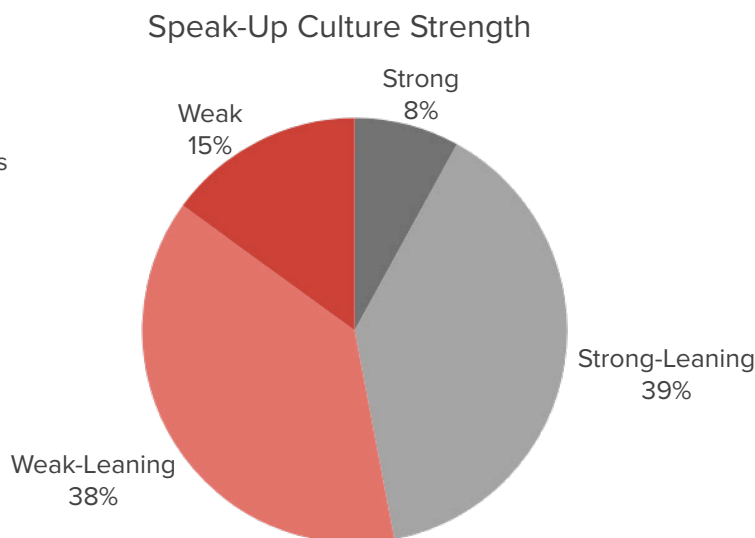
In weaker cultures, the organization and its employees do not practice, promote and nurture open communication, nor do they elicit participation by all and encourage employees to bring concerns forward.

Reported Observed Misconduct

82%

61%

Weak Speak-Up Culture   Strong Speak-Up Culture

Example:
In weak speak-up cultures, 61% of employees globally who observe misconduct report their observation.

In strong speak-up cultures, one-third more report (82%).

[2] The ECI Speak-Up Culture Index determines the strength of an organization's speak-up culture by combining survey items asking employees their view on seven items that demonstrate open communication within the organization. Survey items that make up the index include the following: managers at different levels in the organization effectively communicate with employees, employees do not fear retaliation for speaking up to managers at different levels, employees are listened to and employees welcome diverse viewpoints.

Management suppression of speaking up is pervasive in organizations globally.
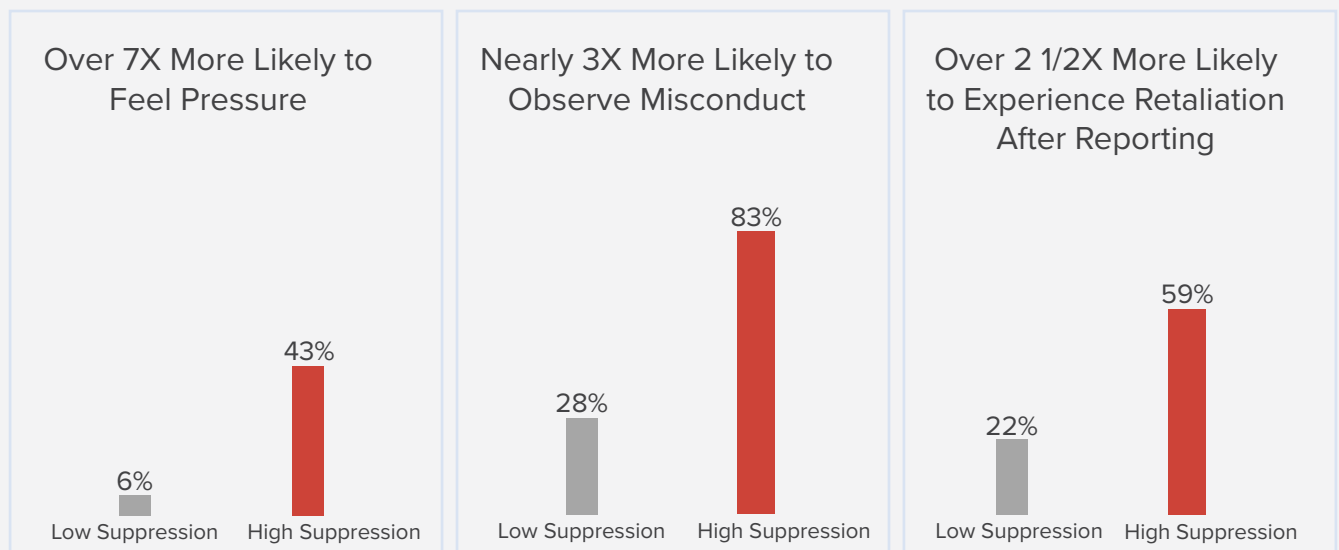
Even more concerning is the fact that **over three-quarters of employees globally perceive that their organization's leaders are actively suppressing speaking up**,[3] putting the workplace, employees and stakeholders at great risk.

These factors include management covering up E&C problems, supervisors tolerating retaliation and managers at various levels placing blame on others.

Risk of Managers Suppressing Speaking Up

- Low 6%
- Moderately Low 18%
- High 43%
- Moderately High 32%
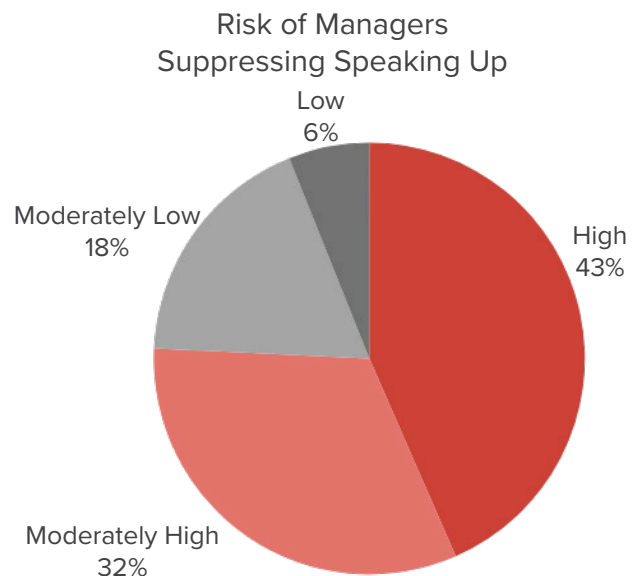
When management suppresses speaking up, such suppression encourages other inappropriate conduct within the workforce.

Employees Are:

| Over 7X More Likely to Feel Pressure	Nearly 3X More Likely to Observe Misconduct	Over 2 1/2X More Likely to Experience Retaliation After Reporting
6% Low Suppression — 43% High Suppression	28% Low Suppression — 83% High Suppression	22% Low Suppression — 59% High Suppression

[3] This is based on the collective examination of management behaviors that suppress speaking up.

Employees globally do not speak up because they fear personal harm and lack trust in the confidentiality of the reporting process.

Organizations that wish to promote speaking up must ensure safety for those who report. The most recent GBES examined some of the primary factors which employees surveyed cite for not reporting misconduct, including fears of retaliation, fear of losing their job and being publicly labelled as a reporter or "snitch".
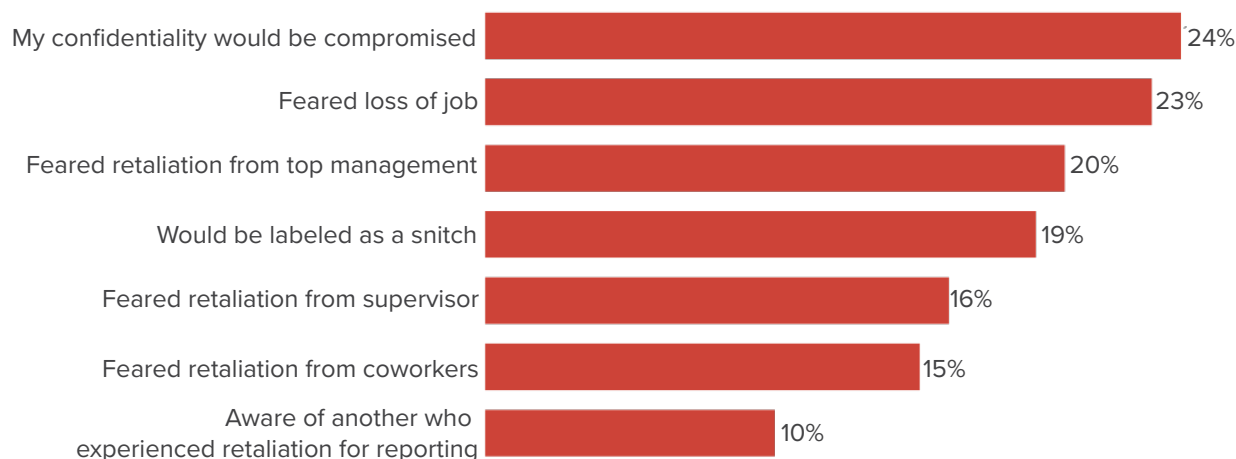
Unfortunately, 62% of employees globally responded that they perceived one or more potential risks for personal harm when considering whether to report misconduct.

Percent of Employees Fearing Personal Harm if They Report Misconduct

Perceives No Risks
38%

Perceives One or More Risks
62%
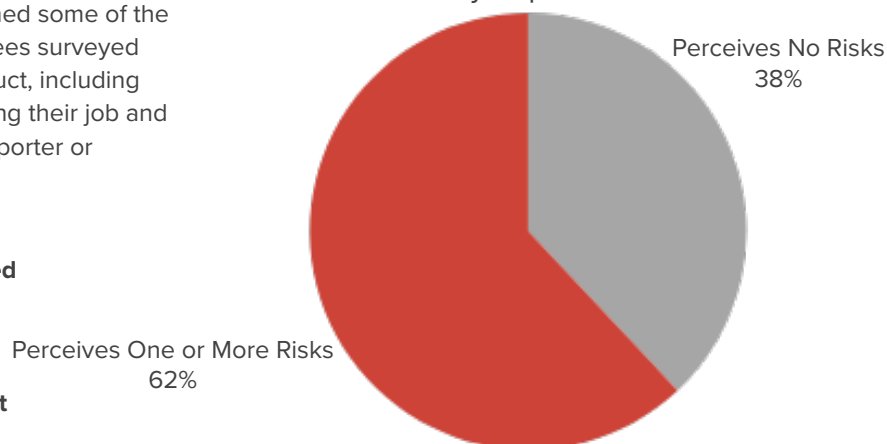
Lack of trust in privacy is one of the major obstacles cited as part of the potential for personal workplace harm; **nearly one in four employees globally (24%) did not trust that their report would be kept confidential.** Without trust in the workplace and its confidential reporting processes, employees can be tempted to remain silent, fearing personal and professional consequences as a result of reporting.

Reasons for Not Reporting Misconduct

Reason	Percent
My confidentiality would be compromised	24%
Feared loss of job	23%
Feared retaliation from top management	20%
Would be labeled as a snitch	19%
Feared retaliation from supervisor	16%
Feared retaliation from coworkers	15%
Aware of another who experienced retaliation for reporting	10%

Countering these disconcerting findings, a strong speak-up culture is associated with less fear of reporting among employees.

By focusing on building and sustaining a strong speak-up culture, an E&C team can catalyze organizational change, materially impacting reporting rates.

Role of Speak-Up Culture in Combatting Reporting Fears

Percent Citing Harms As a Reason For Not Reporting

Weak	77%
Weak-Leaning	60%
Strong-Leaning	52%
Strong	45%

*The percentages in this graph are calculated by subtracting the no (zero) harms values from 100%.
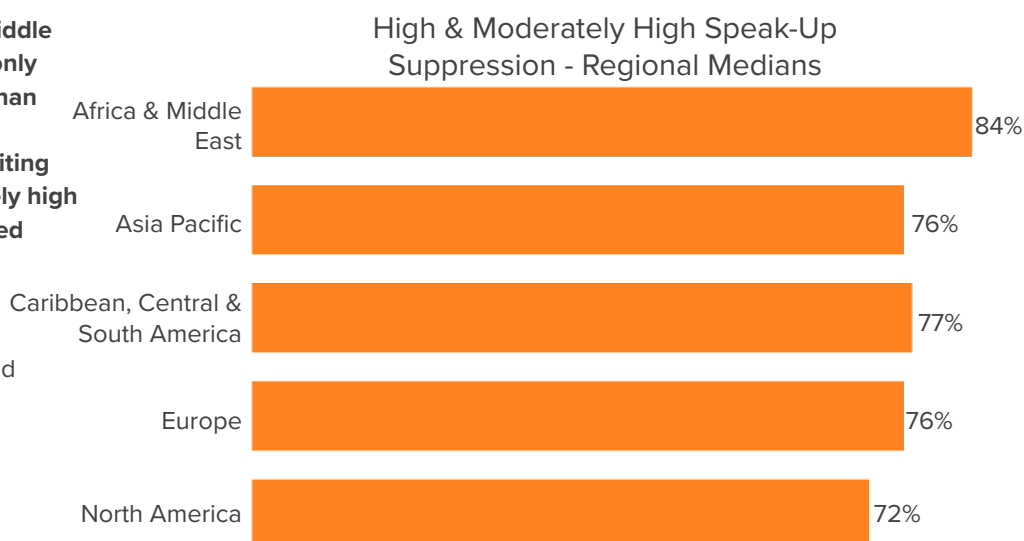
Employees who know they can speak up with confidence will be better equipped to advocate for the organization's purpose, and ready to stand up for what they know is right. Addressing the biggest obstacles to a strong speak-up culture can bring organizations further from risk and closer to effective compliance.

Management-related speak-up suppression is more common in some regions, especially Africa & the Middle East, than others.

Based on the most recent GBES survey, the global region which faces the most management-related speak-up suppression is Africa & the Middle East.

The Africa & the Middle East region is the only region with more than four out of five employees (84%) citing high and moderately high management-related suppression rates.

While still the norm, management-related suppression is less common in North America.

High & Moderately High Speak-Up Suppression - Regional Medians

Africa & Middle East	84%
Asia Pacific	76%
Caribbean, Central & South America	77%
Europe	76%
North America	72%

Conclusions and Recommendations

Employees should not be made to fear open communication and reporting of misconduct; rather, they should understand that these are vital components of a healthy organization.

There are steps any leader can take to build a speak-up culture. Leaders should take a self-inventory and reach out to their team to determine whether employees:

- **Feel seen and heard after 1:1 conversation with leaders**
- **Feel adequately informed of the changes and shifts in the organization**
- **Have any questions about how the organization is being directed that they have not voiced, and if so, what has deterred them from asking such questions**
- **See the organization celebrate and value diversity in experiences and mindsets, even if diverse opinions might complicate decisions or operations**[4]

Engaging in these conversations and focusing on the employee experience within the culture of a workplace can help leaders draw important conclusions about the efficacy of an E&C program and determine whether the organization is effectively building a strong speak-up culture.

Some of the top deterrents of speaking up reflect a lack of trust in internal organizational processes for reporting, whether these are concerns about confidentiality or potential risk of retaliation from the organization or coworkers. Leadership can take specific action to reduce these fears.

1. **Have a clear, consistent reporting process — and make intentional efforts to inform employees of the way the reporting process works.** Pertinent information about how reports are conducted, how anonymity is guaranteed, guidance about what constitutes retaliation, consequences for retaliation from peers or superiors and other protections for employees should be readily available and consistently communicated.

2. **Frame speaking up as not just one step, but a vital, ongoing process.** This mindset shift initiates a cycle of self-reflection within the organization and sets the stage for integrating transparency into business strategy and practices. By making honest discussion a regular part of a team's practices, reporting can be framed as constructive, not as "snitching," as some employees fear: It reduces misconduct and helps create a safer, more productive environment for all. One ready-made vehicle for encouraging conversation is ECI's Talking the Walk, which features case studies and examples to help leaders and employees understand what they can do to protect and encourage speak-up culture and strengthen other dimensions of ethics & compliance in their organization.

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[4] ECI Fellows and Senior Fellows have access to the GBES question set through the interactive GBES Database. To learn more, please visit www.ethics.org/gbes-database/.

3. **Take accountability for mistakes or ethics failures when they occur.** Admit and own up to mistakes, as opposed to covering up failures, to promote trust. When mistakes are covered up or blame is passed along, trust disintegrates throughout the organization. This leads to a culture that suppresses speaking up for fear of being blamed, causing misconduct to go unreported and putting the entire organization in jeopardy. Leaders can combat this by being transparent with their teams about organizational failures, even when it is difficult or embarrassing. Owning up to failure is never more difficult than the consequences of letting trust decay within the organization.

4. **Focus on implementing a High-Quality E&C Program (HQP).** Leaders can access many tools that can help them support their teams in speaking up, including ECI's historical research on the foundational principles of a High-Quality E&C Program (HQP). These principles include:

   - Speaking Up
   - Accountability
   - Risk Management
   - Integrity
   - Strategy

   ECI's HQP Assessment helps organizations easily identify weak spots in an organization's culture and benchmark against industry peers.

Want more detail about the dangerous practices that can lead to speak-up suppression? Data from 42 countries, along with a wealth of other insights from the GBES study are available in our online database. A GBES Dashboard is available to the public while more in-depth information is accessible to ECI members at the Fellow and Senior Fellow levels. To learn more, please visit www.ethics.org/gbes-database/.

About the Global Business Ethics Survey

Since 1994, the Ethics & Compliance Initiative (ECI) has conducted the most reliable longitudinal, cross-sectional study of workplace conduct from the employee's perspective. Now in its 17th iteration, ECI's Global Business Ethics Survey® (GBES®) data provides the global benchmark on the state of ethics & compliance in business across the globe. This version of the study is ECI's largest undertaking in its history. The international benchmark is a sample built from surveying employees in 42 countries across all regions of the world.

Results for all 42 countries, including demographic information and aggregated responses to approximately 40 GBES questions are available in ECI's new interactive, searchable, GBES Database. To access, visit www.ethics.org.

Methodology

The 2022/2023 GBES data collection took place between August 2022 and January 2023. Over 75,000 employees participated in the survey across 42 countries. Participants are representative of employees in businesses in each country conducted. For more information, visit www.ethics.org.

GBES Funders

ECI's longstanding research on workplace integrity provides insights for evidence-based decisions by corporate, academic and other institutions across the globe. Corporations, foundations and individuals invest in the work of ECI because they value the research it provides.

We are grateful for the generosity of our funders and appreciate their ongoing support. Without their investments in our research, ECI could not collect data from employees around the world and provide mission-critical reports for business leaders and the Ethics & Compliance community.

With your ongoing support, ECI will continue to sustain its longitudinal data collection while expanding its focus on special topics of interest to the Ethics & Compliance community.

Consider joining this illustrious group of funders to help ECI continue its research efforts. Your support provides the opportunity to expand our reach to serve others in meaningful ways.

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ABOUT ECI

ECI empowers organizations to build and sustain the programs that are proven to increase integrity in organizations. We help leaders create strong ethical workplace cultures and successful businesses that do the right thing.

Visit ECI's website at www.ethics.org to learn more. For media inquiries, please contact CarolL@ethics.org.