The Employee Voice

the real story behind speaking up at work

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Safecall

A Law Debenture company

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Executive summary

why reporting still feels risky

Despite decades of progress in workplace ethics, a troubling reality persists: misconduct remains widespread, yet significantly underreported. This report explores the disconnect between what employees observe and what they feel safe to share - and the risks that silence creates.

Based on a survey of over 2,000 UK employees across sectors and seniority levels, the findings reveal a culture where speaking up is still fraught with uncertainty:

- 41% of employees have witnessed unfair treatment, yet only 23% reported it.
- 36% cite fear of personal consequences as the most common barrier to speaking up.
- 62% say they would trust independent whistleblowing services more than in-house teams.
- Only 18% expect meaningful change after reporting misconduct.

These figures point to a deeper issue: reporting mechanisms alone are not enough. If employees doubt their concerns will be taken seriously, or fear retaliation, trust breaks down and risks go unchecked.

The cost of silence is high. Unreported issues can escalate, erode morale, damage reputations, and expose organisations to legal and financial risk. Building a true speak-up culture requires more than policies - it demands visible leadership, psychological safety, and a commitment to act on what employees share.

This report highlights the strategic imperative for organisations: empower employees to speak up, and ensure their voices lead to real change.

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Only **18%** expect meaningful change after reporting misconduct

Misconduct uncovered

what employees see, hear, and suspect

Misconduct in the workplace is not a distant possibility - it's a lived experience for many employees across the UK. From unfair treatment and bullying to unsafe practices and discrimination, the data reveals that these issues are widespread, often unreported, and deeply embedded in organisational culture.

What employees have witnessed

- 41% have seen unfair treatment, such as favouritism or unequal workloads.
- 35% have witnessed bullying.
- 32% have observed unsafe working conditions.
- 28% have seen discrimination; 21% substance abuse; 18% sexual harassment.
- Less visible issues like fraud, bribery, and modern slavery are reported by 11–18%.

Despite the visibility of misconduct, reporting remains inconsistent. For example, while 41% have witnessed unfair treatment, only 23% reported it - and 18% chose not to report at all. Similar gaps exist across other categories, suggesting that fear, uncertainty, or mistrust continue to suppress employee voice.

What employees have heard about

Misconduct is not only witnessed - it's widely discussed. Between 20-30% of employees say they've heard about issues like bullying, discrimination, fraud, and sexual harassment, even if they haven't seen them first-hand. These informal channels - rumours, stories, second-hand accounts - reinforce the perception that misconduct is part of the organisational landscape.

Whether seen, heard, or suspected, misconduct is widely believed to be happening - and that perception alone is a risk

What employees believe is likely happening

Perceptions of risk are equally revealing:

- Nearly 50% believe unfair treatment is likely to occur in their workplace.
- Around a third expect bullying, discrimination, and unsafe practices to be happening.
- Even less visible issues like data protection misuse and sexual harassment are considered likely by 26–31% of employees.

These perceptions suggest that misconduct is not just a matter of isolated incidents - it's seen as systemic.

Chart 1: Which of the following behaviours have you witnessed, heard about, or believe are happening within your workplace?

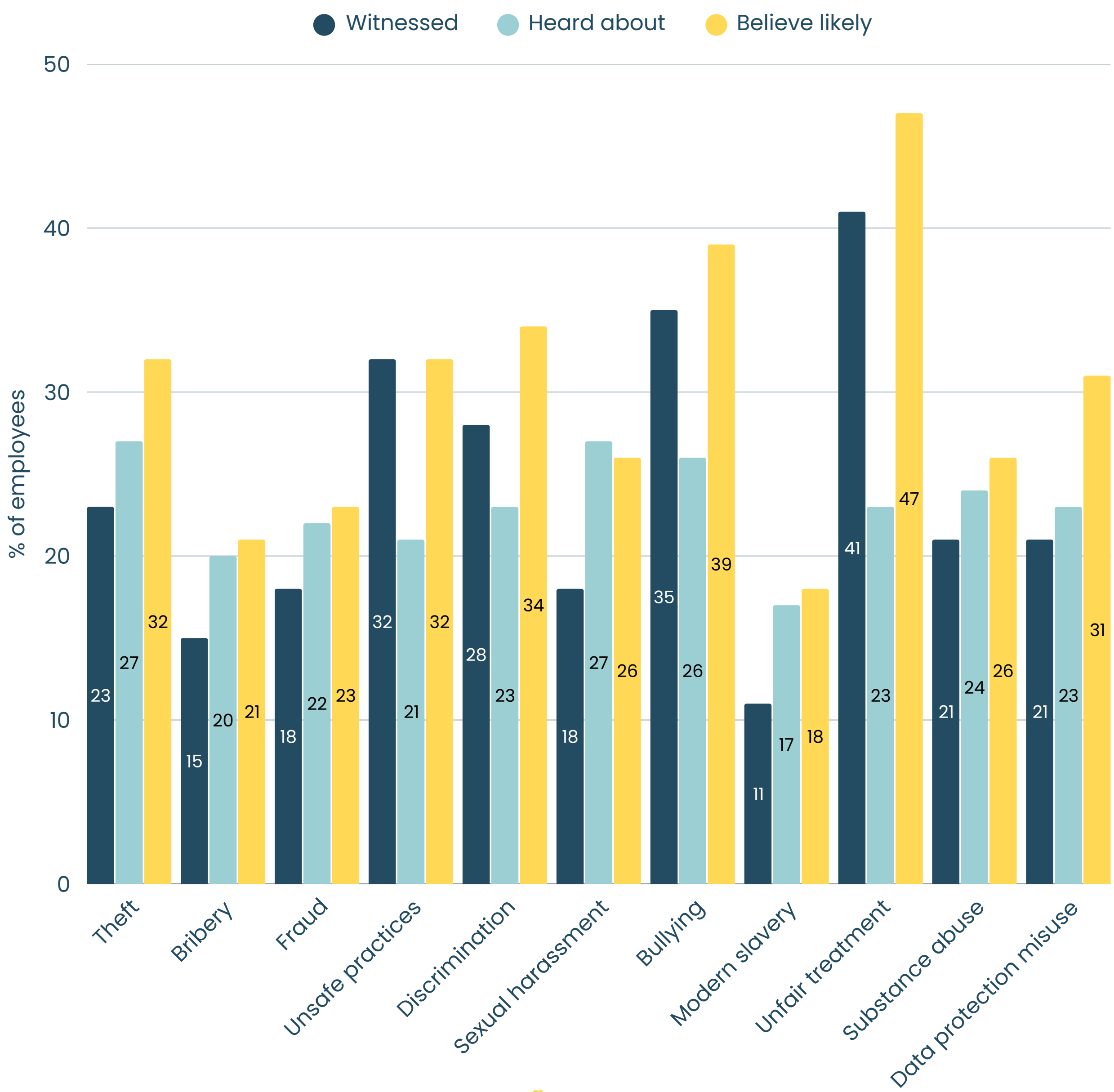


Chart 2: Most commonly witnessed misconduct types by gender

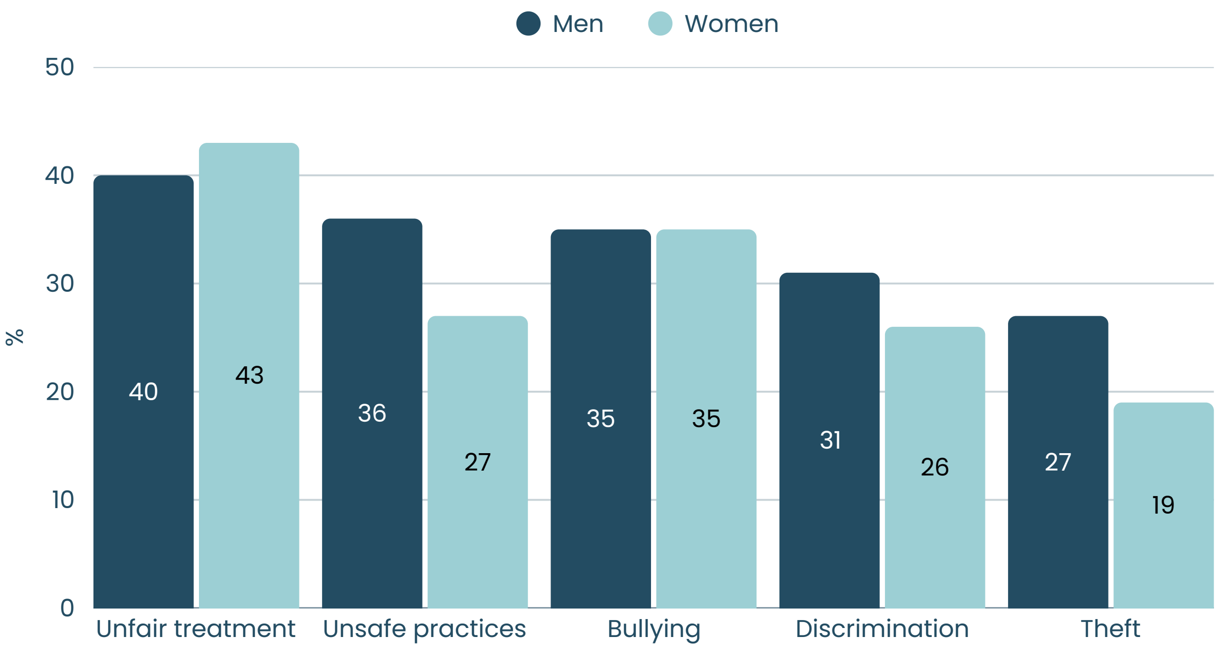


Chart 3: Most commonly witnessed misconduct types by industry

Consumer goods & services

1st	Unfair treatment	42%
2nd	Bullying	32%
	Unsafe working practices	32%
4th	Theft	30%
5th	Discrimination	23%

Industrial goods & services

1st	Unfair treatment	45%
2nd	Unsafe working practices	38%
3rd	Bullying	35%
	Theft	35%
5th	Discrimination	34%

Communication

1st	Unfair treatment	46%
2nd	Unsafe working practices	43%
3rd	Bullying	41%
	Theft	35%
5th	Discrimination	35%

Financial services

1st	Unfair treatment	42%
2nd	Bullying	32%
	Unsafe working practices	32%
4th	Discrimination	30%
5th	Fraud	25%

Medical & pharma

1st	Unfair treatment	43%
2nd	Bullying	38%
3rd	Unsafe working practices	35%
4th	Discrimination	33%
5th	Substance abuse	19%

Professional services

1st	Bullying	29%
2nd	Unfair treatment	28%
3rd	Discrimination	25%
4th	Unsafe working practices	20%
5th	Substance abuse	19%

Public sector

1st	Unfair treatment	42%
2nd	Bullying	37%
3rd	Unsafe working practices	24%
4th	Discrimination	18%
5th	Data protection misuse	16%

Mining & energy

1st	Unfair treatment	28%
2nd	Discrimination	22%
3rd	Bullying	17%
	Fraud	17%
	Substance abuse	17%

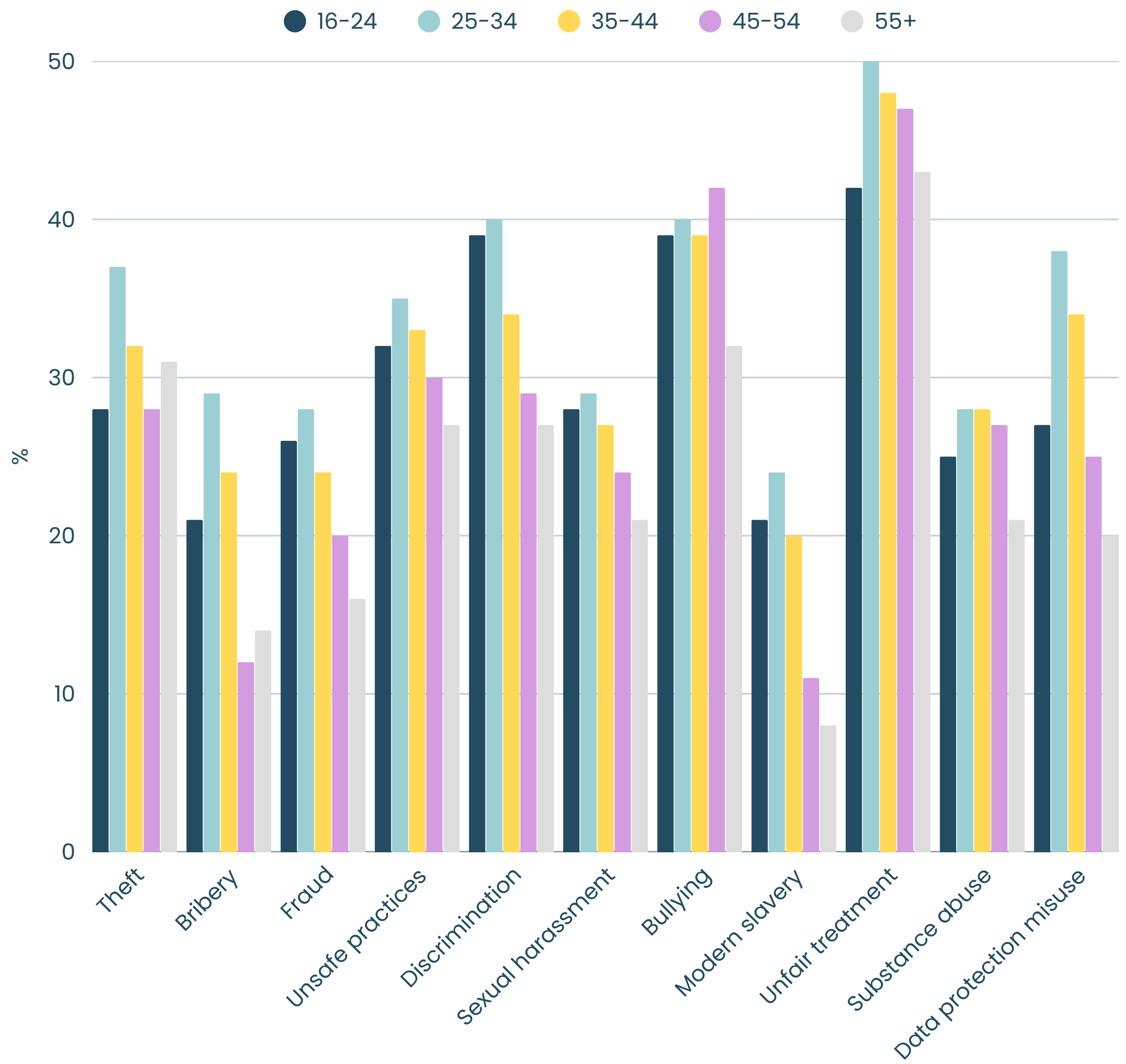
IT & electronics

1st	Unfair treatment	47%
2nd	Discrimination	41%
3rd	Unsafe working practices	40%
	Bullying	40%
5th	Theft	35%

Demographic variances

- **Gender:** Women are more likely than men to witness and report discrimination, bullying, and unfair treatment. Men report higher awareness of substance abuse and data misuse.
- **Age:** Younger employees (16–24) report higher perceived likelihood of misconduct, possibly due to greater awareness or vulnerability.
- **Industry:** Public sector and medical & pharma employees report higher rates of bullying and unfair treatment. Financial services employees express greater concern about fraud and data misuse. Mining and energy workers are more likely to witness unsafe practices.
- **Work location:** Office-based employees are more likely to witness and perceive misconduct, especially bullying and unsafe practices - suggesting that proximity increases exposure and perhaps accountability

Chart 4: Perceived likeliness of misconduct by age



Ready or not

are employees prepared to act?

Most UK employees believe they would know what to do if they witnessed misconduct at work - but confidence is not universal, and gaps in training and policy clarity persist.

Confidence and awareness

- 72% of employees say they would know what to do if they saw malpractice happening.
- However, nearly 1 in 5 are unsure or disagree, representing a significant minority who may hesitate in a real-world scenario.
- Confidence is highest among full-time office workers and older employees.

Training on reporting misconduct

- 21% of employees say they have never received any training on how to report misconduct.
- A further 13% are unsure if they have.
- The most common form of training is online (40%), followed by in-person sessions (19%) and written guidance (7%).
- In-person training is more prevalent in sectors like public sector and medical & pharma, while online modules dominate in IT & electronics and financial services.

Clarity and accessibility of reporting policies

- 73% of employees say their organisation's instructions on how to make a whistleblowing report are clear and accessible.
- However, 13% find them unclear, and 11% say they haven't seen any instructions at all.
- Policy clarity is highest in professional services and financial services, and lowest in sectors like mining & energy and the public sector.

Demographic variances

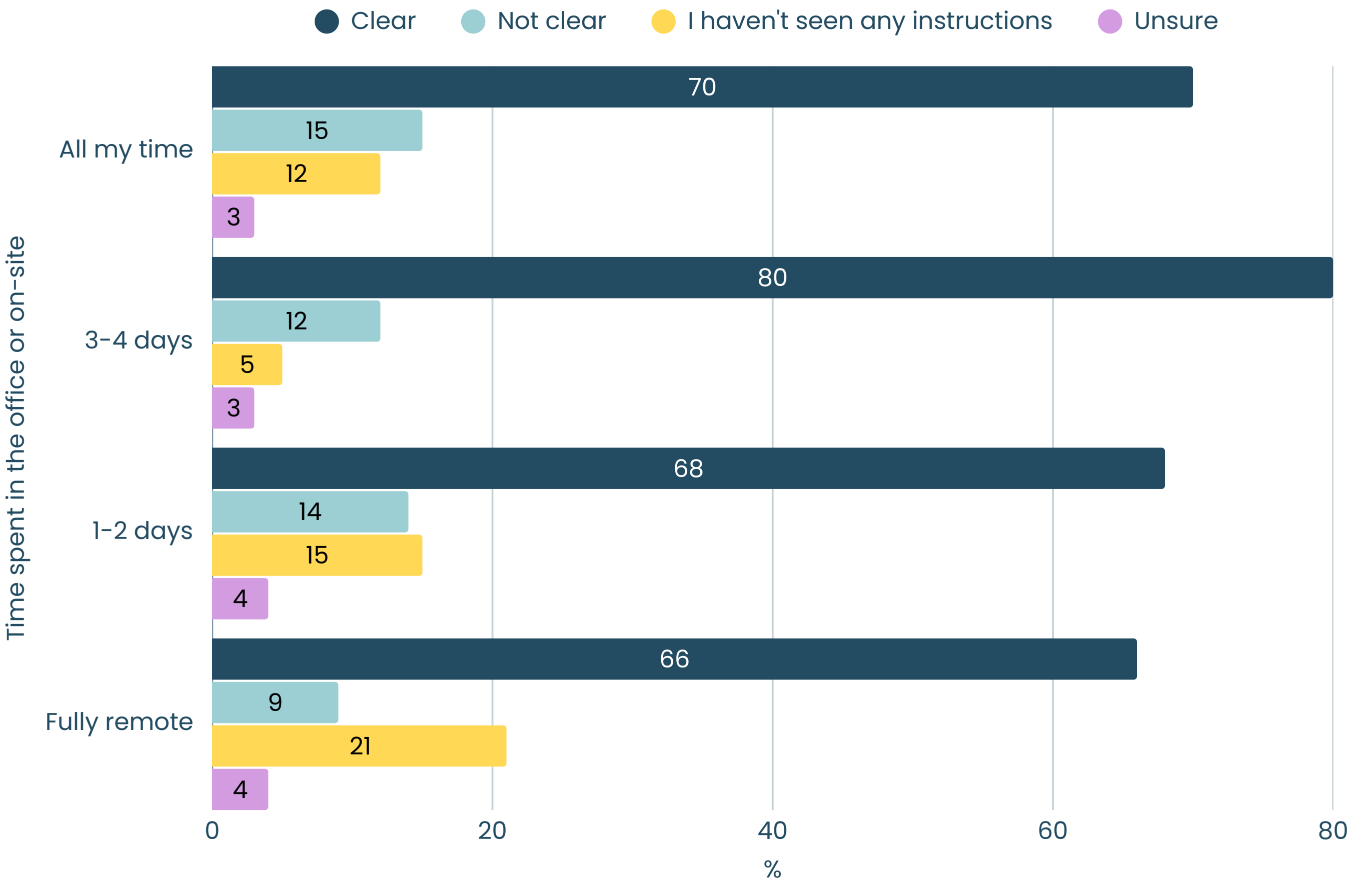
- **Gender:** Women are slightly more likely than men to say they know what to do and to have received training, but are also more likely to say policies are unclear or hard to find.
- **Age:** Younger employees (16–24) are less confident and less likely to have received training, while those aged 55+ are more likely to say they know what to do but less likely to have had recent training.
- **Industry:** Mining & energy and public sector employees are most likely to say policies are unclear.
- **Work location:** Remote workers are less likely to have seen reporting instructions and more likely to feel unsure.

Chart 5: Employee confidence by age

	16–24	25–34	35–44	45–54	55%
If I saw malpractice happening at work, I would know what to do	58%	78%	73%	69%	64%
If I reported malpractice, I would be taken seriously	57%	71%	69%	63%	63%
If I reported malpractice, there would be consequences for me at work	44%	42%	41%	38%	32%
If I reported malpractice, I would be confident I could stay anonymous	48%	70%	61%	48%	48%

Confidence to act isn't evenly spread: younger and remote employees are less sure of the right steps to take, leaving gaps in organisational protection

Chart 6: Policy clarity by work location



Clear, accessible reporting policies empower employees to speak up. When instructions are missing or unclear, risk increases

Speaking up

who hears it first?

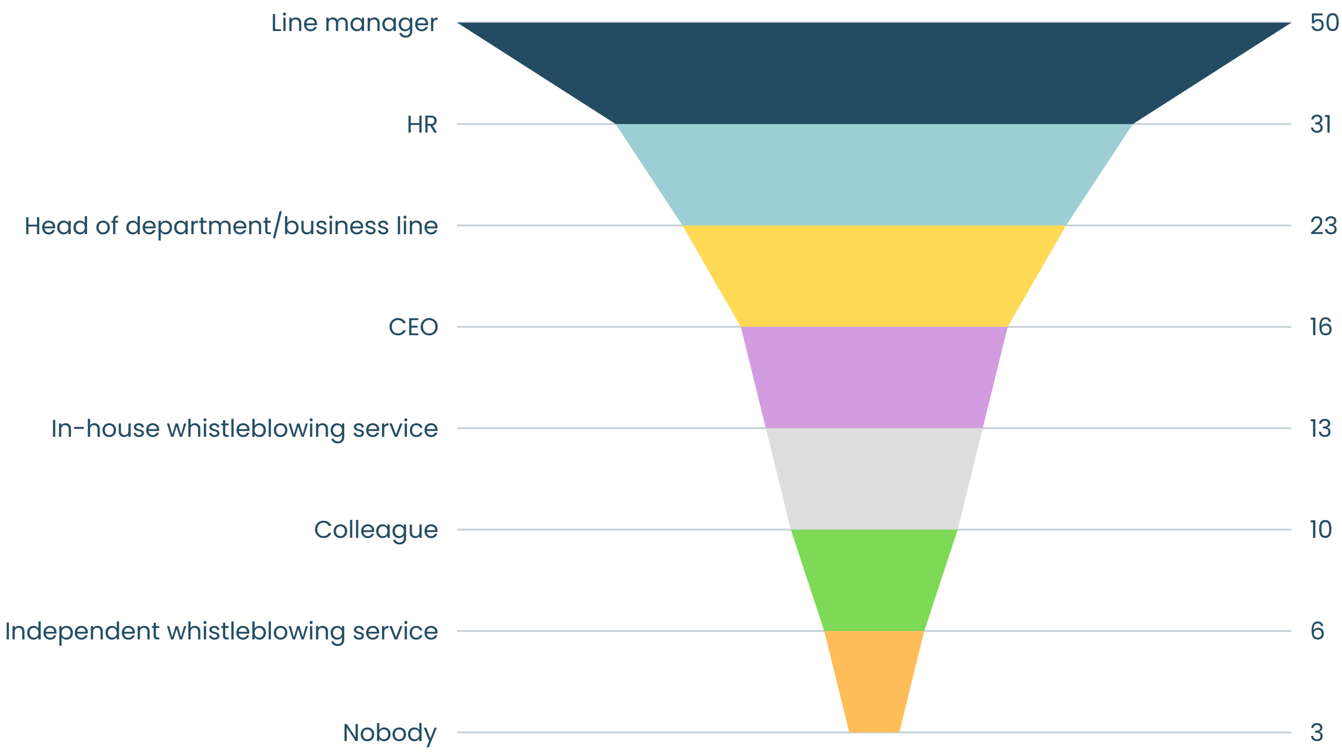
When employees choose to report misconduct, their first point of contact is usually someone they know and trust. The choice of reporting channel is shaped by a mix of accessibility, perceived seriousness, and confidence in how the concern will be handled.

Reporting channels

- 50% of employees report to their line manager - the most common first point of contact.
- 31% go to HR.
- 23% speak to heads of department or business line.
- 16% report directly to the CEO.
- 10% confide in a colleague.
- 3% choose not to report at all.

While internal channels dominate, trust in independence is strong with 62% of employees say they would trust an independent whistleblowing service more than an in-house team.

Chart 7: Who do employees turn to



Reporting patterns by type of misconduct

- Bullying, discrimination, and sexual harassment are more likely to be reported to HR, reflecting their sensitivity.
- Fraud, bribery, and theft see slightly higher reporting to senior leadership or independent services.
- Unsafe practices and modern slavery are most often reported to line managers or external channels.
- Unfair workloads and favouritism tend to stay within immediate management or HR, with little external escalation.

These patterns suggest that employees weigh not just the risks of speaking up, but also the perceived effectiveness and confidentiality of each channel.

The path employees take to report misconduct depends on who they trust, what's accessible, and how serious the issue feels. If any link in that chain is weak, risks go unreported.

Demographic variances

- **Gender:** Women are slightly more likely to report to HR, while men are more likely to report to line managers or remain silent.
- **Age:** Younger employees (16–24) are less likely to report to line managers and more likely to use independent services.
- **Industry:** Medical & pharma and professional services employees show the highest trust in line managers; public sector employees favour HR; mining & energy employees are more likely to stay silent.
- **Work location:** Fully remote employees are more likely to report to line managers and less likely to approach HR or the CEO.

Barriers to truth

what's stopping employees

Even when employees know what to do and how to report misconduct, many still choose silence. The data reveals a complex web of fears, doubts, and emotional barriers that prevent people from speaking up - even when they believe it's the right thing to do.

At the heart of this silence is a lack of trust in outcomes:

- Only 18% of employees believe their report would lead to meaningful change.
- Just 38% believe a whistleblowing concern would be properly investigated with recommendations.
- 40% think there would be consequences for them at work if they reported misconduct.

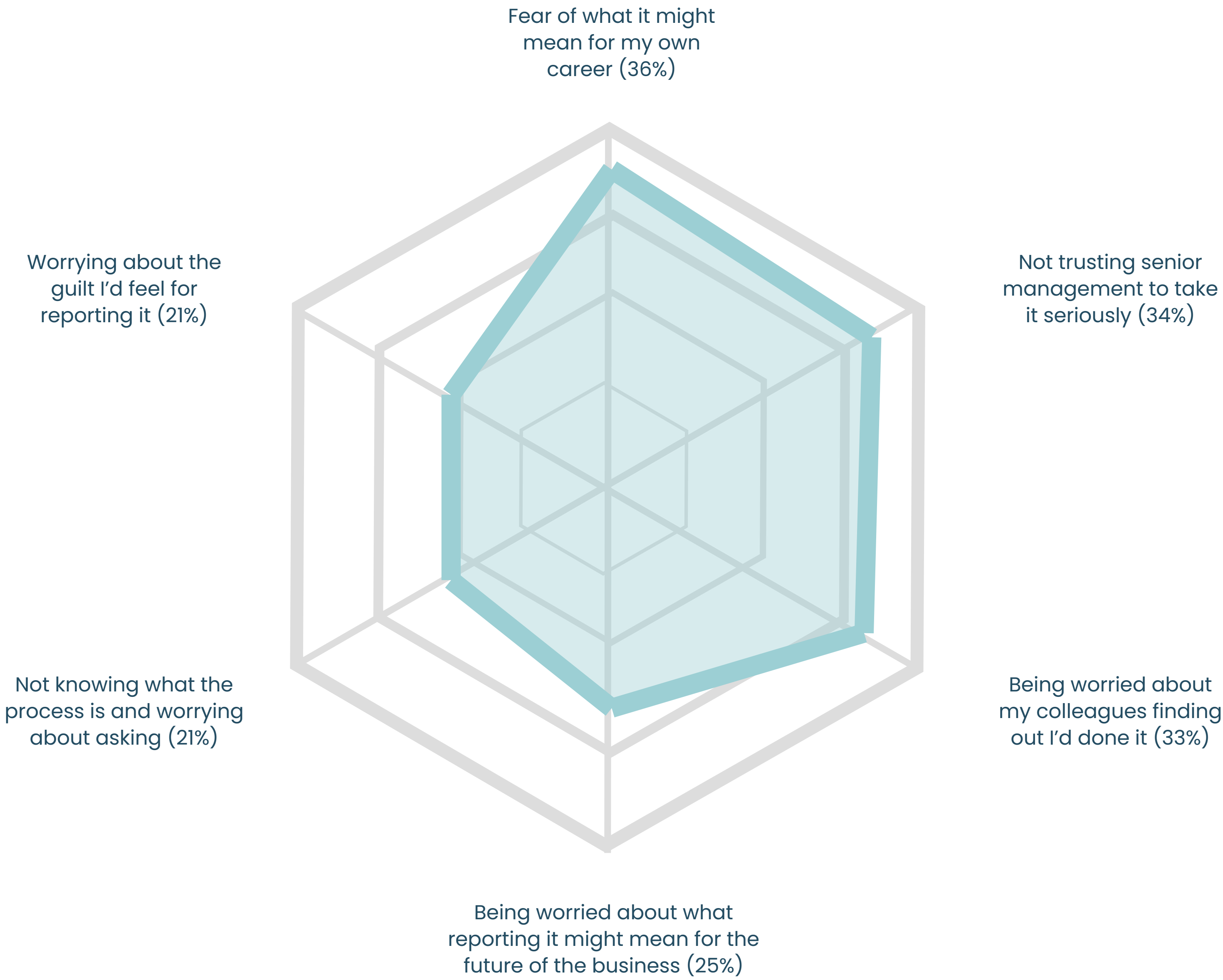
When people feel their concerns will be ignored or brushed aside, the perceived risk of reporting often outweighs the potential benefit. This belief doesn't just discourage reporting - it erodes confidence in the entire system.

Other key barriers include:

- Fear of personal consequences - cited by 36% of respondents.
- Concerns about colleagues finding out - reported by 33%.
- Not knowing the process or feeling uncomfortable asking - 21%.
- Guilt about reporting - also 21%, especially in industries with strong team bonds.
- Distrust in senior colleagues - a third of employees don't believe their report would be taken seriously.
- Anonymity concerns - only 59% are confident their report would remain anonymous.

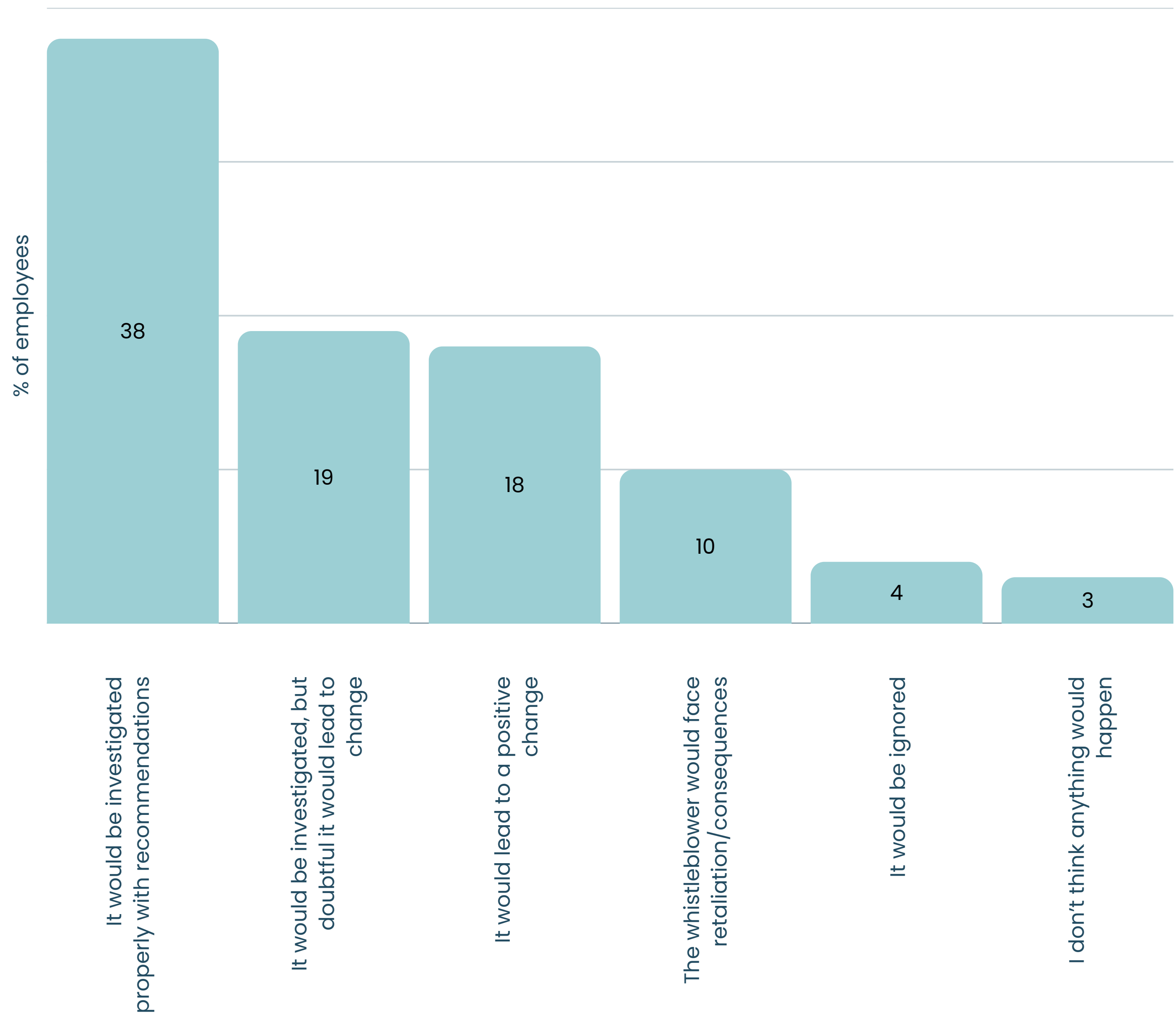
These barriers are emotional as much as procedural. Even with clear policies and training, if employees don't feel psychologically safe, they're unlikely to speak up.

Chart 8: Key barriers to reporting misconduct



Even when employees know how to report misconduct, many still choose not to. Fear, doubt, and emotional strain can be stronger than policy

Chart 9:The expected outcomes of speaking up



Demographic variances

- **Gender:** Women are more likely to fear personal consequences and worry about colleagues finding out.
- **Age:** Younger employees (16–24) are more likely to lack trust in the process and to be unsure about reporting procedures.
- **Industry:** Medical & pharma, public sector, and professional services employees are more likely to cite emotional barriers and lack of trust in outcomes.
- **Work location:** Remote workers are less confident in anonymity and more likely to prefer independent reporting channels.

Strategic risks

why silence matters

Employee silence is more than a cultural concern - it's a strategic risk. When misconduct goes unreported, organisations face a range of consequences that extend far beyond the immediate incident.

Key risks identified

- Underreporting across all misconduct types, especially in high-risk sectors and among younger and remote employees.
- Confidence and training gaps: 1 in 5 employees have never received training on how to report misconduct.
- Trust deficit: only 38% believe reports will be properly investigated; just 18% expect meaningful change.
- Cultural barriers: fear of personal consequences and lack of psychological safety are the top deterrents.

These risks are cumulative. When employees don't speak up, issues escalate, morale declines, and reputational damage becomes more likely. Legal and financial exposure also increases - particularly in regulated sectors where compliance failures can have serious consequences.

Organisations must recognise that silence is not neutral. It signals a breakdown in trust, and it leaves leadership blind to the very risks they are responsible for managing.

From silence to safety

what organisations must do next

To build a culture where employees feel safe, supported, and empowered to speak up, organisations must take strategic, sustained action. The following recommendations consolidate insights from across the report and are designed to address the root causes of silence and underreporting.

1. Build trust in reporting systems

- Ensure confidentiality and protection from retaliation.
- Increase visibility of successful reporting outcomes to demonstrate follow-through.
- Reassure employees that concerns will be taken seriously and investigated properly.

2. Equip managers and leaders

- Train line managers to handle reports with sensitivity, consistency, and professionalism.
- Encourage leaders to model transparency and responsiveness.
- Promote awareness of all available reporting channels, including independent services.

3. Target training and communication

- Provide regular, accessible training on how to report misconduct.
- Use a mix of online and in-person formats tailored to employee needs.
- Periodically review and update training materials and policy documents.

4. Leverage independent whistleblowing services

- Offer external reporting options where internal trust is low.
- Highlight independence and impartiality to build confidence in the process.
- Partner with trusted providers to ensure professionalism and consistency.

5. Monitor and act on trends

- Regularly assess workplace culture and reporting patterns.
- Identify blind spots and cultural risks through data and feedback.
- Address informal channels of information to reduce rumours and misinformation.

The voices behind the insights

Turning data into dialogue - and silence into change

Joanna Lewis is Managing Director at Safecall. She leads efforts to strengthen workplace cultures by supporting organisations with independent whistleblowing services, training, and investigations. Joanna brings a clear focus on turning employee voice into meaningful action and lasting cultural change.

Tim Smith is Operations Director at Safecall. He oversees the call bureau and investigative services, drawing on over 30 years of policing experience. Tim works closely with clients and independent investigators to ensure concerns are handled with professionalism, consistency, and care.

Eve Maxwell is Head of Training at Safecall. With a background in business psychology and learning & development, she helps leaders and managers respond effectively to employee voice. Eve specialises in creating training that drives cultural change and builds confidence to speak up.

About Safecall

Safecall helps organisations build cultures of trust where employees feel safe to speak up. Through our independent reporting services and advanced whistleblowing software, we empower people to raise concerns confidently. We support leaders to listen, respond, and act - creating transparent, accountable environments where every voice matters and misconduct is addressed effectively.

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