

Wendy Addison: Nothing Left to Lose

Introduction

Wendy Addison had worked for nearly eight years in the South African leisure and health club industry and was with LeisureNet Ltd when she made her disclosure. As the international group treasurer, she processed all large transactions. In 2000, she flagged some transactions that looked suspicious. She noticed fraudulent behaviour among the joint CEOs, which the Board did not know about. When she refused to authorise a €6 million payment that lacked legally-required documentation, the joint CEOs and members of her executive team threatened her.

South Africa's relatively high levels of political and corporate corruption made Wendy's situation very difficult. Her only perceived safe route was to anonymously tip off the revenue authority. The regulator immediately fired all the executives, including Wendy. Thanks to dual citizenship, she fled to the UK. Her new job there fell through when her whistleblowing story came to light. Her fight for justice against LeisureNet continued for eleven years, finally resulting in incarceration of the joint CEOs.

Wendy's entrepreneurial drive put her back on her feet. She started up multiple business projects and created a company that trains organisations on speaking out and listening up with courage, and supports other whistleblowers. She is a fierce promoter of speaking out and works to embolden people and equip them with the skills to voice their concerns in the workplace.

The disclosure

Wendy was the international group treasurer in South Africa when she blew the whistle. Her institution was bypassing government approval for offshore transfers of around €3 million to accounts in Spain and Jersey. Wendy directly questioned the directors about these transactions. This took them by surprise. Their unwillingness to discuss the matter created a troubling moral dilemma. These had long been Wendy's friends but she could no longer trust them. Prior to this, she had envisioned her career progressing through the company until retirement.

The disagreement came to a head when Wendy refused to act upon a slip of paper instructing her to send €6 million offshore. As always, she requested proper documentation. This sparked a series of threatening phone calls from the CEOs and from an attorney on the bank's board who had previously been found guilty of corruption by a court.

South Africa had no whistleblowing laws then. Internal auditors were kept in the dark. External auditors were considered by some commentators to be too friendly with CEOs to be impartial. Wendy turned to the revenue services as an anonymous informant. An inquiry started the following week. The regulator suddenly - and unlawfully - fired all the senior executives, including Wendy.

Seven years after the launch of the investigation, the corrupt parties were sentenced to jail. However, Wendy learned that the sentences weren't enforced, and the convicts were "yachting around Mauritius, quaffing champagne." At this, she blew the whistle again and discovered that the whole case had been erased from the judicial database. She was empowered by principal and what

she calls the 'freedom of having nothing left to lose' to take on the courts. In 2011, the joint CEOs of LeisureNet were imprisoned. Justice was finally secured and, in the process, South Africa was forced to rethink its approach to whistleblowers.

The new role

Having fled her country, Wendy and her twelve year old son suffered through a period of destitution. An agency secured a senior role for her at the Virgin group in London. Six months later, she was informed that she was no longer welcome because of her earlier disclosure. It transpired that her new CEO was purchasing LeisureNet. "My wheels fell off emotionally, mentally, physically... cyberspace had captured [me] as a whistleblower of a public listed company that had liquidated. Not great for the C.V." The agency didn't want to work with her again. "It was a hopeless situation because [prospective employers would have said] 'Nobody's been found guilty. You could be making up the story.'"

Rejected by her industry, Wendy pivoted. She became self-employed, embarking on various projects. She took cleaning and carer jobs to get by. By developing her network, she began consulting and speaking on leadership development and performance optimisation.

Nowadays, Wendy works on a voluntary basis with whistleblower groups as a motivational speaker. She also founded SpeakOut SpeakUp, a company that trains organizations in building cultures that foster courageous conversations in order to perform better, and to operate better on behalf of society. She emphasises the 'skill of speaking up,' which she explains is unlearning the "obedience instilled in us by... authorities as children." She recognises how difficult it can be to become 'the dissenting voice.' And how challenging it is to listen up to bad news. Wendy believes that, "As much as fear is infectious, so is courage." She works to 'infect' society with courage, training prospective disclosers to raise issues, and affecting changes to legislation and culture.

Factors that helped

Trusting her 'Ripple'

Perhaps as a reaction to childhood trauma, Wendy is skilled at adapting to adverse circumstances. She trusted herself, "placing hope in the long term, optimising for the long term, no matter how long that took." In the UK, having fled death threats in the wake of her disclosure, Wendy supported herself and her child by begging on the street and squatting in a house. One day, she received £2. She recalls how, instead of looking back, she would decide that the following day, she would make her goal £5.

When her post with Virgin in the UK was terminated, Wendy turned to enterprise. Her time on the streets gave her a sense of liberation that she used to apply herself to new business ventures and to effect cultural and legislative change around whistleblowing.

Her Son

When Wendy migrated to the UK, she found herself alone in an unfamiliar country with no-one but her son. Her family could not help her. Her colleagues gave her no support and some of them threatened her life and that of her son. She describes her child as, "probably the one and only supporter of me" at that point. She stresses the importance of having him in her life. "It's liberated me in so many ways to know that my son thought of me as his hero and has continued to support

me... as he's become an adult." When her spirit was strained and she found herself with suicidal thoughts, he gave her the strength to keep going. "My love for my son kept me here."

Reaching Out

Ironically, having to resort to begging when she fled South Africa gave Wendy an unprecedented sense of freedom that enabled her to follow her curiosity and contact renowned leaders in social psychology such as Philip Zimbardo. She was also encouraged by these new contacts to connect with whistleblower groups and to train in social psychology. Through all these ties, she has received support, training and advocacy work opportunities.

Summary: Wendy today

After blowing the whistle on corruption in the firm she worked for, Wendy Addison and her young son faced death threats and destruction of her career and lifestyle. She sought refuge in the UK, where she saw little option but to take to the streets. Her industry was hostile towards her and she got by with menial work. In this struggle, she continued to fight to bring the CEOs of her firm to justice. Her instincts to follow her own interest in the reasons underlying corruption, along with trust in herself and the future, saw her connect with important relevant figures. These people opened doors to reshaping her career towards advocacy and training others around issues relating to whistleblowing. She continues her work to challenge policy and culture, as she brings her messages to an ever increasing audience through her own company, SpeakOut SpeakUp.

Further reading:

<https://www.iol.co.za/news/south-africa/ex-leisurenet-treasurer-tells-of-abuses-75344#.VO3WJvmsWSo>

<https://www.thesouthafrican.com/news/the-risks-of-exposing-corruption-3/>

<https://www.fin24.com/Companies/Leisurenet-bosses-lived-it-up-20011003>