It must be no fun to work at the legal and compliance departments at Volkswagen AG right now. The revelation by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency that the automaker cheated on its emissions tests has set off an explosion of lawsuits, investigations, financial losses and a new report of duping regulators on environmental issues.

If someone from the company had spoken up years ago about the cheating, Volkswagen might not be in such a bad spot now. This week, the company announced a new policy to spur whistleblowing. Those employees that report wrongdoing at the company before the end of November—if they are covered by collective bargaining agreements—can get immunity from losing their jobs or being held liable by Volkswagen itself for damage claims.

This use of amnesty to help root out corporate misconduct isn’t totally unheard of. Siemens AG took similar steps in 2008 while embroiled in a bribery scandal. But it’s still a move that sends a message. “I think it speaks volumes to the gravity of the situation they [Volkswagen] find themselves in and the need for them to really do something super aggressive to unearth how they got into the situation,” says Gregory Keating, a partner at Choate, Hall & Stewart.

The idea may help Volkswagen score some points with regulators and the public, but it doesn’t provide complete legal protection for employees. Also, asking for whistleblowers to speak up only now after the scandal has been going on awhile only underscores the fact no one blew the whistle before. “It’s too little too late to now say: ‘Come forward, tell us what you know and we’ll make sure we don’t fire you,’” says Susan Divers, who is a member of the advisory services practice at LRN, a global ethics and compliance services firm.

It remains to be seen exactly what protocols Volkswagen had in place to deal with whistleblowers before the EPA revelations. “I don’t claim to know what happened at Volkswagen,” says Keating “but it seems to me that had there been more of a robust system, common sense would suggest that someone along the way would have said: ‘We have an issue that needs to be looked into here.’”

Companies should think about how they can get whistleblowers to speak out before a problem escalates. But to avoid Volkswagen’s mistakes, in-house counsel would be smart to ensure there is more than just a hotline that whistleblowers can call if they see something wrong. “The hotlines really only receive a small fraction of the important issues,” says Divers. She advises involving company leaders—especially middle management—in the effort to create a culture of speaking up. “You have to look well beyond the hotline and train your middle managers to really identify and respond to employees’ concerns properly,” she notes “because that’s where most employees’ concerns are voiced.”

Keating also emphasizes the importance of bringing middle management into the E&C and whistleblowing picture, and adds that companies should feel free to make this a part of manager performance reviews. “Evaluate them on the basis of how well they performed in terms of meeting expectations to ferret out, identify, and help resolve problems as they come up,” he says.