

Whistleblowing: causes and effects



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Abstract

Whistleblowing, an act of reporting violations of an organization to the media or other external parties, is one often frowned upon by organizations worldwide. Recent world events has created a bigger spotlight on acts of whistleblowing. This is especially so in the recent actions of Edward Snowden and his leak on information relating to the National Security Agency of the United States. Snowden's revelations on the activities of the NSA created a storm in the media but at the same time generates questions relating to why and how such acts of whistleblowing come about.

This report seeks to understand if whistleblowing is truly worth carrying out. This is done through identifying factors leading to whistleblowing in relation to aspects of I/O psychology as well as linking them to Snowden's case. The effects of whistleblowing on both the individual as well as the organization is also further explored. Methods of controlling and perhaps even preventing whistleblowing are also identified and discussed based on past literature.

Introduction to the Issue

A key issue faced by organizations especially in recent times, would be a breach in an organization's ethical standards through whistleblowing.

Whistleblowing is often a derogatory term used to refer to an individual's act of dissent (Parmerlee, Near & Jensen, 2004) whereby they report an act that is a violation of a rule, regulation, law or of human rights in an organization to the authorities or the media (Yeargain & Kessler, 2010). A clear example of whistleblowing at the highest levels of society would be through the

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articles from The Guardian on June 5th and 6th 2013 regarding Edward Snowden's leak on the activities of the United States National Security Agency (NSA). Snowden, a former systems administrator for the Central Intelligence Agency disclosed that these activities included tracking phone calls of U. S. citizens through various mobile service providers (Greenwald, MacAskill & Ackerman, 2013) as well as online activities through the Prism project which tapped into users' data on Apple, Google and other agencies (Greenwald & MacAskill, 2013). From this, the area of conflict arises where there is a question whether such acts of whistleblowing is helpful to the organization and even society or simply detrimental to the functioning of the organization in question.

Relationship to I/O Psychology

The basis of organizational psychology examines both the influences that an individual has on the organization as well as how the organization influences the individual. Organizations set out the expectations of the employees and the employees themselves have a set of expectations from the organization. However there may be instances where incongruities may exist as a result of organizational cultural change or expectation of the employees (Dawe, 2000). Such incongruities may in turn lead to employees reacting in different ways one of which being through acts of dissent (Hamilton, 2011). Hamilton (2011) suggests that such acts may be motivated by self-interest which can be either real or perceived, or even a need to resolve a crisis of conscience. Employees also learn how the organization assesses dissent or even acts of dissent through means of socialization or personal experience (Hamilton, 2011).

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Relating this to Snowden's NSA leak, it can be suggested that such incongruities between his own expectations and the NSA's activities could have motivated him to carry out the act of whistleblowing. It could be further suggested that it was done as a means to resolve a crisis of conscience or perhaps even an act of self-interest.

Analysis on Whistleblowing

In order to understand how whistleblowing comes about there is a need to look into further factors that give rise to it in an organization. Often time, employees are left with only three main choices when they are aware of unethical office behaviour, they either exit the organization, voice their discontent (whistleblowing) or remain silent (Mesmer-Magnus & Vesveswaran, 2005). Various studies have examined how whistleblowing intentions are formed, how these actions are taken and in turn retaliation from the organization occurs (Mesmer-Magnus & Vesveswaran, 2005). Such research is often done by means of carrying out surveys of actual whistleblowers or using scenarios or interviews to determine when an individual exposed to organizational misdemeanor will be drawn to blow the whistle or possess the intention to make a claim (Mesmer-Magnus & Vesveswaran, 2005).

From these research, certain personal characteristics have been highlighted that link to whistleblowing tendencies. These include individuals who have good job performance, are highly educated with high supervisory job positions, obtain high scores on tests relating to moral reasoning and support acts of whistle blowing in relation to unethical behavior (Mesmer-

Magnus & Vesveswaran, 2005). Empirical data also seem to suggest that individuals with better job experience and performance are usually in better positions to act as whistleblowers and often times are able to obtain desired results unlike in most circumstances (Mesmer-Magnus & Vesveswaran, 2005).

There are also additional contextual variables that promote whistleblowing. Some of which include supervisor and coworker working relationships, the organizational climate, challenges or threats of retaliation from the organization and even the size of the organization (Mesmer-Magnus & Vesveswaran, 2005). These contextual factors are often taken into consideration by individuals when choosing to either whistleblow internally (within the organization), or externally to other authorities or the media (Mesmer-Magnus & Vesveswaran, 2005).

Effects of Whistleblowing on the Individual

As it has been highlighted, there are various factors that lead an employee to resort to whistleblowing. However in most instances the effects of whistleblowing after an individual has carried it out is not always positive or pleasant. After an individual carries out whistleblowing, he often faces heavy retaliation from the organization and other parties involved (Mazmudar, 2013). They are often ostracized by not only the organization but other social groups and may in turn suffer from physical and emotional distress (McDonald & Ahern, 2002). This is explicitly so in Snowden's case, where he is currently seeking asylum in Russia as he has been heavily condemned by the US government and would be arrested if he were to return home.

A study by McDonald and Ahern (2002) analyzed and compared the physical and emotional effects faced by nurses who had and had not carried out whistleblowing activities. These groups were both exposed to whistleblowing situations and only differed in whether they had carried out the actual whistleblowing act. In relation to physical effects the study showed that nurses who had actually whistleblown reported higher rates of lack of energy and sleep disturbances, nervous/immune system and body disturbances, digestive system problems and respiratory/cardiac system problems (McDonald & Ahern, 2002). The emotional effects which included feelings of anger, sadness, unworthiness and fear were relatively high in both groups indicating that both non-whistleblowers and whistleblowers suffered (McDonald & Ahern, 2002). However an interesting point of note in the study would be that in some instances a higher percentage of non-whistleblowers experienced emotional effects as compared to the actual whistleblowers suggesting that remaining silent when faced with misconduct may not prevent one from emotional disturbances (McDonald & Ahern, 2002). A similar study by Jackson *et. al* (2010) also further supported this claim and indicated that whistleblowing had a powerful effect on all those involved and despite current understanding on the vulnerability of whistleblowers and any support measures present, whistleblowing is still considered to be a highly stressful phenomenon.

Effects of Whistleblowing on the Organization

Like individuals, the organization itself will encounter various effects of whistleblowing. Based on a report by Yeargain & Kessler (2010) it is suggested that organizations believe in a model that instills conformity,

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obedience and loyalty in individuals towards their superiors. Often times questioning is viewed as being insubordinate and disloyal and is met with hostility. This is even more so when individuals are tasked with keeping secrets of state and organizations feel that they have conferred a large amount of trust based on the individual's character, values, worth and core identity (Ellsberg, 2010). Therefore if such a trust has been broken, this results in harsh retaliation from the organization against the individual.

Although there may be damaging public image to the organization, there may also be detrimental effects to external parties as a result of whistleblowing. Issues relating to national security may risk the safety and well-being of the citizens of a nation (Ellsberg, 2010). As with Snowden's case, key secret information on the activities of the NSA was divulged which may in turn provide enemies of the US having information on methods that the nation takes to protect its citizens.

Control of Whistleblowing

Based on a report by Vinten (1996), although whistleblowing is seen as an undesirable act, there are certain positive outcomes that it can bring about if carried out in an appropriate manner. Vinten (1996), suggests that acts of whistleblowing should be institutionalized and internalized by the organization. This would in turn allow supervisors or relevant parties to be aware of misdemeanors before they end up on the media and in turn take corrective action. An alternative suggestion would be the use of itinerant company lawyers who would act as a means of communication for whistleblowers. Such practices would in turn protect not only the

organization but the whistleblowers as well and promote organizational cohesiveness (Vinten, 1996).

Conclusion

The act of whistleblowing is most definitely one that is filled with controversy and varying degrees of unpleasantness. Based on organizational psychology incongruities in beliefs and expectations between the individual and the organization seem to be the root cause in whistleblowing. In many cases whistleblowing is done with the best intentions in order to correct unethical behaviors or practices however based on past studies and research as stated in this report, the repercussions of such actions are usually negative. They are negative to the extent that it effects the physical and emotional well-being of all individuals despite their direct involvement in the whistleblowing act. This is clearly seen in Snowden's case where there was public outrage with the activities of the NSA. This in turn destabilizes the citizen's trust in the NSA as well as the United States Government as a whole and would most definitely lead to both physical and emotional distress to all parties involved.

Based on this, it would seem that the negative aspects of whistleblowing seems to outweigh any positives ones. Whistleblowing should be avoided unless absolutely necessary and no other avenue of change is available. As suggested by previous studies an internalized way of communicating displeasure or unethical behavior should be implemented in organizations and a strong emphasis should be put into monitoring and ensuring that these system are functioning effectively.

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