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An examination of the role whistle-blowing education plays in the whistle-blowing process

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ABSTRACT

Research suggests that whistle-blowing education plays an important role in the whistle-blowing process. Despite this, only one article was found in the literature that examined the relationship between whistle-blowing education and actual whistle-blowing, and it was conducted over three decades ago. Moreover, no study was found that studied whistle-blowing education and retaliation. Consequently, the relationship between whistle-blowing education and both whistle-blowing and retaliation in federal agencies are explored in this paper. The results suggest that whistle-blowing education boosts whistle-blowing in general and is negatively associated with retaliation. However, whistle-blowing education appears to enhance internal whistle-blowing and not external whistle-blowing. These findings have important implications which are discussed in the article.

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1. Introduction

News stories involving unlawful or unethical acts committed in agencies are commonplace. What is often absent or ignored in the coverage of these stories is that many of the wrongful activities would not have been revealed if it were not for the disclosures of former or current employees. This is because employees are oftentimes the only ones who witness these unauthorized activities and thus are the ones who can provide the best information about them (Delmas, 2015; Lowe, Pope, & Samuels, 2015; Mieth, 1999). For instance, Dr. Sam Foote, a physician employed by the Phoenix Veteran's Administration (VA) facility, reported to officials how scheduling was improperly manipulated by the VA hospital to make the patient wait-times appear much shorter than they actually were (Andrzejewski, 2015). Other employees in the facility then followed his lead and disclosed the problems they witnessed with wait-times. The net result was a series of

government investigations revealing that some patients waited longer than a year (Houdek, 2014) and that some veterans even died while waiting for their appointments (Slack, 2016).

Since whistle-blowing is important to uncovering unlawful activities, scholars have extensively examined this occurrence in organizations. This avenue of research generally suggests that the whistle-blowing process is influenced by a mix of personal factors (e.g., ethnicity, gender, and education), situational factors (e.g., severity of wrongdoing and frequency of occurrence), moral reasoning, and organizational factors (e.g., supportive culture) (Brewer & Selden, 1998; Caillier, 2016; Caillier, 2012/2013; Cassematis & Wortley, 2013; Mesmer-Magnus & Viswesvaran, 2005; Park, Blenkinsopp, & Park, 2014; Rothwell & Baldwin, 2006). Although each of these categories has been investigated, an organizational factor that has received scant attention is whistle-blowing education. More specifically, only one article was found to examine the relationship between knowledge of whistle-blowing (the outcome of whistle-blowing education) and whistle-blowing (Miceli & Near, 1984); and, no study was found to

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explore the effectiveness of whistle-blowing education in reducing retaliation.

To close this lacuna in the research, I examine the link between education on whistle-blowing and two major aspects of the whistle-blowing process—i.e., whether or not it affects actual whistle-blowing and retaliation. This paper contributes to signaling and whistle-blowing theories by finding that whistle-blowing education has a positive effect on whistle-blowing and a negative effect on retaliation. Furthermore, these relationships were found in a Merit Systems Protection Board (MSPB) survey—a large-scale survey containing U.S. federal employee data that is fairly representative of the entire federal workforce in the U.S.

2. Review of literature

2.1. Whistle-blowing

Whistle-blowing is generally referred to as “the disclosure by organization members (former or current) of illegal, immoral, or illegitimate practices under the control of their employers, to persons or organizations that may be able to effect action” (Near & Miceli, 1985, p. 4).¹ Therefore, acts do not necessarily have to be illegal to fall under whistle-blowing. They can involve lying, poor management practices, waste, something deemed unethical, corruption, stealing, and endangering the health of citizens.² The wrongdoing can also vary in severity. For instance, theft can range from taking a few dollars to millions of dollars. Additionally, whistle-blowing can be classified as internal or external. Internal whistle-blowing includes reporting to co-workers, immediate supervisors, senior agency officials, and agency inspector general. External whistle-blowing, on the other hand, can include notifying the Government Accountability Office, law enforcement, union officials, media, Congress, Congressional staffer, advocacy group, or U.S. Office of Special Counsel. However, the qualifying condition for whether a disclosure is whistle-blowing in general is that it has to be made to someone that can “effect action” or correct the situation. Finally, it is clear from the definition of whistle-blowing that it can include former or current employees. This research focuses on the latter.

2.2. Retaliation

Retaliation is defined as an “undesirable action taken against a whistle-blower—and in direct response to the whistle-blowing” (Miceli, Near, & Dworkin, 2008, p. 11). There are two types of decisions organizations have to make when individuals report wrongdoing in agencies. They can either ignore the disclosure or retaliate against the whistle-blower. Research does suggest that whistle-blowers are more likely to be disregarded than to experience reprisals. Miceli and Near (2013), for instance,

examined the survey results of government employees in several countries. They found that fewer than half of whistle-blowers in these countries reported facing retaliation in Australia (i.e., 22%), Norway (i.e., 4–8%) and the U.S. (i.e., 17–38%). Moreover, a survey conducted on employees working in the UK’s National Health Service found that 19.7% of employees were ignored and 17.3% were victimized by management when they raised a concern about wrongdoing, while 9.1% were ignored and 8.2% reported being victimized by coworkers (Francis, 2015). Although the vast majority of whistle-blowers do not face reprisals, the frequency of retaliation claims has increased, at least in the U.S., over the past two decades (Vodanovich & Piotrowski, 2014). Hence, retaliation is a real concern for whistle-blowers and for policymakers who are trying to eliminate or curtail its effects.

Similarly to whistle-blowing, severity of retaliation varies. Examples of retaliation in Australia, Barbados, UK, and U.S. include: ostracism, character defamation, harassment, demotion, work overload, poor performance appraisals, denial of promotion, disciplinary actions, transfers, and termination (Alleyn, Weekes-Marshall, & Arthur, 2013; Francis, 2015; Jos, Tompkins, & Hays, 1989; Liyanarachchi & Adler, 2011; Mesmer-Magnus & Viswesvaran, 2005; Peeples, Stokes, & Wingfield, 2009). The type of whistle-blowing and the context of the wrongdoing also determines whether retaliation will occur. For instance, external whistle-blowers are more likely to face retaliation when their disclosures are very harmful to the organization (Dworkin & Baucus, 1998) and when they are reporting severely engrained wrongdoing (Miceli et al., 2008).

3. Theory and hypotheses

According to signaling theories, organizational support occurs when organizations undertake voluntary activities that signal to employees that they care about their welfare (e.g., Lambert, 2000; Eisenberger, Stinglhamber, Vandenberghe, Sucharski, & Rhoades, 2002). Several examples of organizational support include empowerment; managerial support; discretionary benefits, like work-life programs; and education and training programs (e.g., Caillier, 2013). While research indicates that organizational support can engender a number of desirable performance-related outcomes, it has also been found to be an important predictor of decisions made in the whistle-blowing process (Caillier, 2012/2013; Cho & Song, 2015; Miceli et al., 2008; Mesmer-Magnus & Viswesvaran, 2005; Parmerlee, Near, & Jensen, 1982).

In government, agencies are tasked with educating their employees about whistle-blowing. This includes educating them on the various internal and external reporting options that are available to them if they choose to blow the whistle, as well as the pros and cons of each option (Berry, 2004). Whistle-blowing education also informs employees about the legal rights afforded to whistle-blowers.³ For instance,

¹ It is important to note that although this whistle-blowing definition is commonly used it does not match the legal definitions of whistle-blowing, as pointed out by an anonymous reviewer.

² These examples of whistle-blowing were listed as items in the Merit Principles Survey 2010. Therefore, the Merit Systems Protection Board considers these items as “illegal, immoral, or illegitimate practices.”

³ Information about the ethics and whistle-blowing education provided to U.S. federal employees (the employees examined in this paper) can

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