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Whistle blowing in the organization: wrongdoer or do-gooder?

ABSTRACT

In his speech at the Anti-corruption Summit Conference in Cape Town in 1998, the deputy president of South Africa said that the culture of entitlement, so prevalent in our community, had contributed to the 'name it, claim it' syndrome where individuals sought an elusive moral justification for engaging in criminal activity and that public servants were obliged to serve the public with integrity (Speech of the ...: 1998 [0]).

Although the problem of corruption can be traced back to the 1960s in America and the 1980s in South Africa, the concept of whistle blowing has become an important phenomenon in modern organizations in the last decade. Subsequently, it is clear that the concept of whistle blowing should be conceptualized in terms of a theoretical framework to provide a context for the analysis thereof. The main aim of this article is therefore to conduct an exploratory study, based on a comprehensive literature review, to explore, elucidate and critically assess the current status of whistle blowing in South Africa.

The first section of this article explores the development and theoretical perspectives on the concept, and proposes perspectives on whistle blowing as a communication phenomenon. The second section deals with the current status of whistle blowing in South Africa in terms of legislation and ethical considerations. The last section operationalizes the whistle blowing process and proposes criteria for dealing with whistle blowing in the organization.

1. INTRODUCTION

Whistle blowing can be traced back to 1963 in the USA when Otto Otopoka, States Department, revealed classified documents on security risks to the chief counsel for the Senate Subcommittee on Internal Security and was dismissed from his job for improper conduct by the Secretary of State at the time, Dean Rusk (Petersen & Farrell, 1986:2-3). Various actions have been taken in support of whistle blowers internationally. One such action towards acknowledging the whistle blower as a 'do-gooder' is probably the suggestion made by a United Kingdom Government Committee that whistle blowers should be included in the British Honours systems for their good corporate citizenship (Vinten, 2000:166). Another action in the United Kingdom is the Public Interest Act that came into force in July 1999, which provides for unlimited compensation to whistle blowers who are persecuted for their disclosures (Dyer, 2003).

In South Africa, the business, government and professional spheres are progressively more disillusioned about the ethical malaise and culture of corruption. According to Camerer (1996), most of the reasons stated for this on a state level relate to the corrupting nature of the apartheid state, and on a business level to often immoral means of gaining access to world markets. Statistics revealed by a joint survey completed by the government and the United Office on Drugs and Crime's Southern Africa division indicate that only 13% of corruption in South Africa is uncovered through whistle blowers (the remaining percentages include 60% which by official processes, 18% by civil society and eight per cent by the media) (Terreblanche, 2003).

According to Borrie and Dehn (2003), workers will not blow the whistle if they assume that they risk victimization, losing their job or destructing their career unless culture, practice and the law create an environment in which it is safe and accepted to raise issues of corruption and illegality.

Two paradigms can be identified for studying the concept of whistle blowing: seeing the whistle blower as a 'wrongdoer' or seeing the whistle blower as a 'do-gooder'. According to Near and Miceli (1996:515), whistle blowers are employees who are in the wrong place at the wrong time, and because they have the chance to observe wrongdoing, often because of the nature of their occupation, they will act if they can successfully cause the termination of the wrongdoing. These authors' research indicated that whistle blowers are usual people finding themselves in unusual places forced to play a part in the whistle-blowing process due to circumstances. While some studies indicate that most whistle blowers are do-gooders and do not suffer from retaliation against them, results from case studies indicate that the existence of whistle-blowing myths and misinformation that perpetuate it may lead to the perception that whistle blowers are wrongdoers.

2. THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES

2.1 Definition of key concepts

Various authors define whistle blowing as the process in which an organizational member (former or current) discloses confidential information to the outside world (on its employer or one of its employees) relating to illegal, illegitimate or unethical practices (like danger, fraud, corruption or other illegal conduct) linked to an organization (Louw, 2002:121; Near & Miceli, 1985:6). A whistle blower at some point starts with active negotiation with representatives of an external regulatory unit, which can trigger a controversy over the whistle blowers' motives and character as well as the merits of the information revealed. This differs from the role of a defector where the member of an organization negotiates exit principally with organizational authorities that grant permission for role relinquishment and control the exit process as well as the construed story (Bromley, 1998:150).

Based on the above definition, it is clear that whistle blowing consists of three crucial elements:

- A perception by a person within an organization of morally incorrect conduct.
- The communication of this perception to parties outside the organization.
- A perception by those in authority in the organization that this communication should not have taken place.

2.2 Theoretical perspectives

Whistle-blowing research has been hindered by the lack of a sound theoretical foundation to interpret as well as the lack of appropriate methods for observing the phenomenon. Most empirical studies have relied on case studies, which hamper the generalizability of the findings. As a result, limited theoretical perspectives have been applied to whistle blowing. Previous studies examined whistle blowing mainly from an organizational behaviour perspective and identified personal characteristics (Miceli & Near 1984, 1988) and organizational variables (Miceli & Near, 1988) as the main characteristics, that may contribute to whistle blowing, or that group conformity may impede the whistle-blowing process (Greenberger, Miceli & Cohen, 1987).

Until the 1980s, the problem was mainly viewed from legal, philosophical and policy perspectives where some inconsistencies in rulings existed due to the lack of legislation, etc. Based on this, various authors realized the importance that organizations need a theoretical framework for investigating whistle blowing (Near & Miceli, 1996:508-9).

Various theoretical perspectives have been proposed (or tested empirically), ranging from theories about power relationships (Near & Miceli, 1988), justice theory, organizational change and ethical climate (Near, Dozier & Miceli, 1991).

Based on existing theories that have guided research in other areas of organizational behaviour, the following approaches have been used to conceptualize the concept of whistle blowing:

- The expectancy theorists (for example, Vroom, 1964) see the individual's force to blow the whistle as a function of the perceived likelihood that outcomes such as managerial attention to the complaint, recognition of the whistle blower's identity, public attention, etc. would pursue action.
- The reinforcement theory framework (for example, Skinner, 1953) argues that the wrongdoing serves as a discriminative stimulus for action when similar wrongdoings (stimuli control) have been followed consistently by successful opposition in the past positive managerial reaction. In this case, wrongdoing settings may serve as a signal of 'don't act'.
- The threat of retaliation theory (for example, Nader, Petkas & Blackwell (1972)) is linked to the previous theory in arguing that this threat would prevent would-be whistle blowers from taking action. This approach postulates that an individual's desire and ability to manipulate the environment ('self-efficacy') is essential to their well-being which may motivate them to perform acts that demonstrate this self-efficacy, but that the risk of feared consequences and situational uncertainty of whistle blowing could influence efficacy expectations.
- The efficacy theory argues that perceived efficacy and willingness to file a future complaint were closely related to perceived change in managerial attitudes, but not to retaliation. According to them, efficacy serves as a necessary condition for action.
- The prosocial behavioural perspective (for example, Brief & Motowidlo (1986); Dozier & Miceli (1985) and others) argues that whistle blowing is not an act of pure altruism but is more appropriately viewed as 'prosocial' behaviour involving selfish (egoistic) and unselfish (altruistic) motives on the part of the person who wants to blow the whistle, and that certain stable personality characteristics of individuals may interact with their perceptions of organizational situations that may lead to whistle blowing. According to this perspective, the whistle blower attempts to benefit other parties believed to be harmed by the wrongdoing and suggests that predictors of other types of prosocial behaviour may also envisage whistle blowing. Near et al. (1991:274) argue that individuals with an internal locus of control are more inclined to prosocial behaviour (helping and crime reporting) than those with an external locus of control and will therefore be more likely to blow the whistle.

From the above, it is clear that where the expectancy and reinforcement models of motivation see beliefs as a function of the organizational environment (including the power relationships among the person and the actions) and the individual's reinforcement histories or personality characteristics, it seems that situational circumstances are suggesting that whistle blowing will be efficacious or altruistic and will evoke more whistle blowing than otherwise. Organizational communication studies also indicate that subordinates are less likely to report inappropriate behaviour to officials higher up in the hierarchy of an organization (King, 1997).

2.3 Whistle blowing as a communication phenomenon

Based on a comprehensive literature survey, it is clear that limited attempts have been made to study the process of wrongdoing as a communication phenomenon. In this regard, King (1997:419) emphasizes that previous studies ignored the interpersonal issues with regard to whistle blowing. He proposed it should be examined from a communication perspective by focusing on two potentially interacting variables, namely relational closeness and severity of the wrongdoing as this has not been addressed by previous research. In his research, King (1997) focused on how interpersonal relationships interact with a situational variable, namely the severity of the wrongdoing. The results indicated that relational closeness between an observer and a wrongdoer influenced the decision to report it; and that the severity of the wrongdoing are related to the likelihood of reporting a wrongdoing through internal channels (if available) in spite of fear of retaliation.

A communication perspective on whistle blowing emphasizes the importance of open channels of communication to ensure information dissemination within the organization. Authors like Glauser (1984) and Stewart (1990) accentuate the importance to transmit information up the organizational hierarchy and indicate that open channels between superiors and subordinates will alleviate external whistle blowing.

It can be argued that if whistle blowing is seen as a communication phenomenon from a theoretical point of view, whistle blowing behaviour may be influenced by the organization's structure and culture and it could be argued that if an internal structure and proactive communication strategy are available, they will create an ethical atmosphere within the organization encouraging employees to report unethical behaviour in an ethical manner.

2.4 Factors in the whistle-blowing process

The following factors play a role in the whistle-blowing process (Near & Miceli, 1985; Miceli, et al., 1991; Near & Miceli, 1996):

- Individual characteristics like moral development/behaviour (including moral judgement, religious and social responsibility, etc.), personality variables (like low self-esteem, field dependence, intolerance of ambiguity, etc.), demographics (like age, education, gender, etc.) or job situation (pay, job performance, supervisory status, professional status, job satisfaction, organizational/job commitment to name a few).
- Situational conditions that can be divided into wrongdoing characteristics (like quality of evidence, type of wrongdoing, wrongdoer low social status, seriousness, etc.) and organizational characteristics (like company policies, group size, bureaucracy, organizational culture and climate, incentives for whistle blowing, high performing organizations, etc.).
- Power relations and the amount of power that individuals or units have in the organization.
- Other factors like loyalty, issues of conformity, social and/or financial support and membership of professional groups.

Based on the above, Near and Miceli (1996:513) propose three competing theoretical perspectives for taking the step of whistle blowing: the whistle blower's moral development; the whistle blower's loyalty; and the situational variables and their potential interaction effecting personal variables. According to them, whistle blowing should be viewed theoretically as a dynamic relationship between several social actors: the whistle blower(s), the wrongdoer(s), the complaint recipient(s), co-workers, the immediate supervisor and the dominant coalition or top management team of the organization, which are influenced by the interactions among them.

3. CURRENT STATUS OF WHISTLE BLOWING IN SOUTH AFRICA

3.1 Legislation

Legislation provides powerful ammunition in the fight against corruption in the workplace as it provides 'protection' for employees who would otherwise be too intimidated to disclose information of unlawful or corrupt behaviour, practice or conduct by either employers or fellow employees (Camerer, 2000:2). Legislation promotes the concept that the workplace must ideally be an environment where every individual is accountable for his or her actions. The concept of truth is a difficult and complex endeavour. More often than not, the whistle blower becomes a victim of unwelcome behaviour, reprimands, undue criticism, exclusions and rejection, isolation, the recipient of verbal and written warnings, and referrals to psychiatrists. It is in view of this that whistle blowers would first look for reasonable indications of protection in the law; and without legislation, whistle blowers may be tempted to remain silent.

The South African Constitution of 1996 has enshrined the following democratic values and principles by which public administrators must be governed (The constitution, 1996:107):

- A high standard of professional ethics must be promoted and maintained.
- Efficient, economic and effective use of resources.
- Public administration must be development oriented.
- Services must be provided impartially, fairly equitably and without bias.
- Public administration must be accountable.
- Transparency must be fostered by providing the public with timely, accessible and accurate information.

The Protected Disclosures Act No. 26 of 2000 (or more informally ‘The Whistleblowers Act’) makes abundantly clear the South African government’s resolve and commitment to freedom of speech and its intention to create a climate of transparency in both the public and private spheres (The Government Gazette, 2000:4 [0]). It also makes extensive provision for procedures to enable and assist employees to make protected disclosures on the unlawful or irregular conduct of their employers or co-workers, without the fear of victimization or reprisal. It is imperative that the disclosure be true and made in good faith. Section 1 of the Protected Disclosures Act defines ‘disclosure’ as quoted below (The Government Gazette, 2000:4 [0]):

- (i) any disclosure of information regarding any conduct of an employer, or an employee of that *employer*, made by any *employee* who has reason to believe that the information concerned shows or tends to show one or more of the following:
 - a. that a criminal offence has been committed, is being committed or is likely to be committed;
 - b. that a person has failed, is failing or is likely to fail to comply with any legal obligation to which that person is subject;
 - c. that a miscarriage of justice has occurred, is occurring or is likely to occur;
 - d. that the health or safety of an individual has been, is being or is likely to be endangered;
 - e. that the environment has been, is being or is likely to be damaged;
 - f. unfair discrimination as contemplated in the Promotion of Equality and Prevention of Unfair Discrimination Act, 2000 (Act No. 4 of 2000); or
 - g. that any matter referred to in Paragraphs (a) to (f) has been, is being or is likely to be deliberately concealed.

The procedures enshrined in the Protected Disclosures Act are of paramount importance in that they offer the potential whistle blower protection from ‘occupational detriment’

(Camerer, 2000:3). The Act prevents the employer from subjecting an employee to occupational detriment upon having made a protected disclosure and it submits an end to escalating instances of retaliation to whistle blowing. However, the employee who makes the disclosure is protected if he or she acts in accordance with the procedure provided for in the Act. 'Occupational detriment' in relation to the working environment of an employee is defined in subsection (vi) of the Protected Disclosures Act as follows (The Government Gazette, 2000:4 [0]):

- a. being subjected to any disciplinary action;
- b. being dismissed, suspended, demoted, harassed or intimidated;
- c. being transferred against his or her will;
- d. being refused transfer or promotion;
- e. being subjected to a term or condition of employment or retirement which is altered or kept altered to his or her disadvantage;
- f. being refused a reference or being provided with an adverse reference, from his or her employer;
- g. being denied appointment to any employment, profession or office;
- h. being threatened with any of the actions referred to in paragraphs a) to g) above; or
- i. being otherwise adversely affected in respect of his or her employment, profession or office, including employment opportunities and work security.

The Act indicates preferred routes for reporting or raising concerns. Each of the prescribed routes has requirements, which become more onerous as the Act progresses from a disclosure made to a legal adviser to ultimately a disclosure made as a general protected disclosure. According to Sections 5-9 of the Act, in order for a disclosure to be protected, it is imperative that the disclosure be made to a legal practitioner, an employer, a member of the Cabinet or the Executive Council, a prescribed person or body as a general protected disclosure (The Government Gazette, 2000 [0]):

The objectives of the Act are to (The Government Gazette, 2000:6 [0]):

- protect an employee, whether in the private or public sector, from being subjected to an occupational detriment on account of having made a protected disclosure;
- provide for certain remedies in connection with any occupational detriment suffered on account of having made a protected disclosure; and
- provide for procedures in terms of which an employee can, in a reasonable manner, disclose information regarding improprieties by his or her employer.

In addition to having legislation, it is imperative that organizations devise and implement their own unique code of ethics.

4. ETHICS OF WHISTLE BLOWING IN THE ORGANIZATION

4.1 Ethics in the organization

The concept of 'whistle blowing' evokes connotations of someone piercingly blowing a whistle, as referees would do on a sports ground to indicate 'illegal' sporting tactics or undertakings that go beyond that which is defined as acceptable. Based on the definition of whistle blowing, ethics can be seen as the moral rules governing our behaviour. In the current professional era of rife competition and upheaval, organizations and employers are in a period of transformation. The transformation of the modern organization and subsequently the modern employee has spiralled and advanced to an extent that makes it increasingly difficult to check and control many of its practices and undertakings. It is thus submitted that it has become alarmingly easier for employers and employees to act in ways that would compromise or impair their professional integrity (Borrie & Dehn, 2003:1).

Based on various perspectives, the following arguments are proposed (Borrie & Dehn, 2003 [0]; Camerer, 1996; Greenberger, Miceli & Cohen 1987; Jensen, 1987; Vinten, 2000):

- The onus is on every employee and employer to endeavour to comprehend and follow the code of ethics of their organization. Those who conduct their affairs, practices and behaviour in a way endorsed by the organization and society at large will inevitably gain integrity, a good reputation and the encouragement and support of their peers and superiors. It is thus clear that ethical issues have to be linked to the social dimension of the public.
- A culture of good governance must be borne in the workplace and the values of trust, honesty, justice and fairness must be weaved into the fabric of our daily work ethic. Such values can and should not be segregated from the daily face of working life and must as such be reaffirmed frequently and consistently.
- It is submitted that all organizations must devise, advocate and implement a code of professional ethics by which employees must abide and those employees who deviate or violate such a code must face appropriate disciplinary action or penalties. It must be made abundantly clear that no employee – despite his or her ranking within the organization – is above reproach and subsequently the ramifications of violating the code of ethics. It is not unfair to recommend that organizations implement harsh codes of ethics. With a tough and harsh code of ethics, employees will be compelled to act in a professional manner, and with integrity. It is in view of this that whistle blowing should be given a good make-over and be encouraged in the organization.

It is a trite fact that the South African society in which we currently live and work is plagued by corruption. This does not detract from the moral issue that as individuals, each employee ought to be held accountable and responsible for his or her actions. No activity in the organization, be it acceptable or unacceptable, should go unchecked, or unaccounted for. The measuring stick to determine ethical behaviour and actions will differ from organization to organization, but ultimately, it has to be borne in mind, the responsibility that each individual has – on a smaller scale – to his or her society. (Sangweni, 2003).

If an employee knows of this deviation from proper practices, and subsequently blows the whistle, surely then whistle blowing should be encouraged. It is clear from this discussion that whistle blowing has negative connotations in the corporate world and that it is imperative that such negative connotations be dissipated. Whistle blowing ultimately surmounts to speaking out when it would have been easier to remain silent and should be viewed as an endeavour to rectify a wrong or a problem.

At times, it may be necessary for the employee to sign a confidentiality agreement with his or her employers. The employee may thus not disclose information that has been acquired in the course of his or her activities. The employee may, however, disclose information that is to be disclosed in the public interest (Camerer, 1996:2).

The ethical code of conduct has to be incorporated into the corporate culture and the procedures of the organization. In line with the policy and the code of ethics, there has to be an ambiance of support and cooperation from the staff. The corporate dream is to be part of an organization that strives for excellence, and where there is a climate of personal and organizational growth, that the individual employee's development is nurtured and defined. Stemming from this ideal, the code of ethics ought to be a document that each employee 'owns' and honours.

It can be argued that whistle blowing can only become acceptable behaviour in the organization and in society if employees and members of the society place a demand on organizations for higher ethical behaviour.

4.2 Policy

Statutory assistance gives the whistle blower protection. However, it is imperative that organizations realize the benefits of setting up a policy – in addition to a code of ethics – for whistle blowing.

The act of whistle blowing should be transformed into a positive activity for the organization. Internal whistle blowing must be constitutionalized as part of the organization's policy and the code of ethics.

A policy pertaining to the activity of whistle blowing ought to highlight the following (Camerer, 1996; Vinten, 2000; Rogerson & Prior, 1998):

- Whistle blowing is appropriate if it involves exposing or disclosing illegal or unethical operations within the organization.
- The disclosures must be in the best interest of the public and in good faith.
- Internal avenues of rectifying the behaviour must first be exhausted. The matter may then be taken up the organization's hierarchy.
- The illegal or unethical behaviour must be perceived to be able to cause death, injury or ill health.
- The whistle blower must not act in order to obtain personal gain.
- A dedicated senior manager should be appointed to deal with employees' concerns and to protect the whistle blower.
- Organizations must have a policy and procedure manual – aligned with relevant legislation – to set out policies and procedures pertaining to the process of whistle blowing.
- Regular workshops must be held to educate employees on having the right to speak out against wrongdoing. Employees must be inculcated with the fact that 'gagging' clauses are prohibited.
- Robust internal disciplinary procedures need to be implemented once evidence of malpractice is identified.
- Systems for supporting and responding to whistle blowing need to be devised and implemented.

5. WHISTLE-BLOWING PROCESS

In order to understand the whistle-blowing process in the organization, it is discussed in terms of how to deal with it in the organizational context, anonymity, steps in the whistle-blowing process, responses to whistle blowing and the effects of whistle blowing on the organization.

5.1 Dealing with whistle blowing in the organization

For organizations to act fairly, they have to be given the chance to deal with the wrongdoing or consider whether it is in fact wrongdoing. This means that the organization must be informed timely about it to enable it to act proactively. In order to act

proactively, it is essential that the organization have a whistle-blowing strategy in place, which should ideally include the following (Borrie & Dehn, 2003; King, 1997:433):

- Appropriate and assessable internal channels to report wrongdoing (this could include channels such as complaints, grievance and disciplinary procedures).
- Alternative channels if these channels are in fact the very people who are implicated in the matter of concern (for example if the organization suffers from systemic maladministration, mismanagement or corruption, it might be dangerous to raise concerns internally or through these channels).

In practice, a person might opt for a third option, the option to remain silent, especially if he or she realizes that his or her facts could be mistaken or that there might be an innocent explanation, especially if the superiors are aware of it and remain silent. A person might also consider his or her private interests before taking action.

It is clear that a paradigm shift in the organizational culture is crucial. This paradigm shift should be away from external restrictions (when wrongdoing is belatedly dealt with) to tougher internal control with preventative management systems to curb deviant behaviour. This viewpoint is eminent in the statement made by the Deputy President who said, in his speech at the anti-corruption summit conference, that *the organizational culture of the public sector must change within a paradigm shift from external sanctions (when misconduct is belatedly addressed) to stronger internal control with anticipatory management systems to check deviant behaviour.*

5.2 Anonymity and whistle blowing

In most organizations, there is a culture of aversion towards the perception of seeing the whistle blower as a *sneak, informer, rat and squealer* (Camerer, 1996:2) or a *troublemaker* – hence the term wrongdoer. Based on this perception, people tend to bend the rules on misconduct, leaving it to others to deal with it, or to contact a regulator anonymously.

A person acts anonymously when his or her identity is not made public. Two schools of thought exist on whether anonymity should be guaranteed or not, which poses the question: does the public have the right to know the whistle blower's identity, or does he or she have the right to withhold it? According to Elliston (1982), anonymity is neutral, the middle ground between secrecy and privacy, and blowing the whistle creates the paradigm of bad manners or snitching behind a person's back where they cannot defend themselves, which may disrupt group cohesion and threaten group solidarity. On the other hand, the seriousness of the incidents might harm the group, which forces

the individual to make a moral judgment, which could be appraised in various ways and to various extents. In most cases, anonymity is encouraged, but it should not be prohibited.

5.3 Steps in the whistle blowing-process

Whistle blowing can be encouraged in the organization if the right process is in place and people are encouraged to report it through the relevant channels. A key component of this process is fairness rather than confidentiality. In order to treat it fair, it is important to have the following definite steps in place to ensure that the disclosure causes the least damage (Near & Miceli, 1985; Camerer, 1996; King, 1997; Near & Miceli, 1996:509):

- Step 1: Reduce opportunities to commit illegal or unethical conduct

Effective screening of new employees is crucial and no opportunities should exist to motivate illegal or unethical conduct. In addition, regular reinforcement and motivation to do the right thing and to avoid wrongdoing through the dynamic enforcement of ethical codes should be part of the organizational policies.

- Step 2: Establish whether the activity observed is actually wrongful

An activity will be wrongful if it is illegal, illegitimate or unethical and the decision to report the activity should be determined by factors like the seriousness of the act, that reporting it will be efficacious, that no alternative actions can be taken and that the whistle blower's personal situation do not influence the decision (for example financial and emotional support, costs and individual characteristics).

- Step 3: Use internal mechanisms in the organization to raise concerns

Internal reporting mechanisms or critical information systems at the most appropriate level where the misconduct can be addressed should be in place to ensure employers do not use other more damaging channels like an external regulator or the media. Miceli and Near (1992) indicated in their research that employees in organizations with clearly defined channels for the reporting of wrongdoing will use them, regardless of whether the wrongdoer is a friend.

- Step 4: Use organizational procedures/policies

This could minimize damage and disruptions in order to correct the situation locally and rapidly. Once the whistle has been blown, the organization should respond or take

action, even if there is a dispute as to the legitimacy of the activity. The organization may decide to ignore the whistle blower or take steps to silence him or her, which might be legitimate, based on the organizational policies or dominant coalition beliefs. According to Camerer (1996), the danger is that 'open door' policies run by a corrupt management might work against whistle blowers and serve to identify the 'trouble makers' to be ejected.

- Step 5: External whistle blowing

External whistle blowing is justifiable only as a last resort if internal channels have been exhausted or are unavailable or unusable or when organizational procedures/policies are not in place. Whistle blowers may use this channel if they think the case will be treated as more credible and that it will attract more attention and ensure corrective actions.

Public Service and Administrative Minister Geraldine Fraser-Moleketi says that for a whistle-blowing mechanism to be effective, there must be effective protection of the identity of the whistle-blower and there must be an effective follow-up of all bona fide disclosures (Mail & Guardian, 2003).

5.4 Responses to whistle blowers

Whether the whistle has been blown through the available internal channels or as a last resort to a regulatory body or the media, the whistle blower will experience negative (being seen as a wrongdoer) or positive (being seen as a do-gooder) responses to his or her action, depending on the culture of the organization (Camerer, 1996).

Camerer (1996) identifies the following responses that might be expected:

- Degradation ceremonies that punish and alienate resisters and protesters occur when the whistle blower suffers at the hands of colleagues who feel betrayed.
- Superiors may punish whistle blowers by questioning their judgement and competence, terminating their employment or blacklisting them from other positions.
- Ceremonies or status evaluation may occur that reinforce the whistle blower's conviction that he or she is acting in the right way.
- Managers might spend time and money covering it up rather than admitting that there are problems or accepting that something is wrong.
- Whistle blowers may be made out as scapegoats ('by punishing the messenger') which means that they suffer grievously for their efforts and might fear retaliation.

5.5 Effects of whistle blowing on the organizational image

The effects of whistle blowing on the image of an organization can be positive or negative.

- Apart from the effect of whistle blowing on the authority structure and functioning of the organization, which may disrupt member relations (Miceli, et al., 1991:271; Jensen, 1987), various arguments may be posed that whistle blowing can have a negative affect on the organizational image. The main reason is the fact that organizations can be exposed, often without being aware of it, and may suddenly face widespread media coverage (mostly negative) and public objection.
- Whistle blowing can also benefit the organization, especially if problems can be brought to the attention of top management, which may alter these actions and avoid public disapproval, costly court cases, infringement of legislation and other negative outcomes.

According to Bromley (1998:150), whistle blowers play a crucial role in organization-regulatory unit relationships – providing otherwise unattainable information, enhancing the regulatory unit's claims to defence of public interest and detracting from any organizational claims of extreme or biased regulatory activity.

6. WHISTLE-BLOWING STRATEGY TO ENSURE A POSITIVE CORPORATE IMAGE

Various authors see whistle blowing as a symptom of a shortfall in the organizational system that should be provided for the new expectations of accountability – where accountability entails the vigilance to provide a clarification and justification to relevant others for a person's acts and oversight (Hunt, 1998).

If whistle blowing is viewed as a communication phenomenon, it should be dealt with in an effective and a proactive way, meaning that organizations should have a strategy in place. According to Louw (in Verwey & Du Plooy-Cilliers, 2002:121), this strategy should be proactive and involve prevention (to avoid it at all costs), information (keeping the employees and relevant stakeholders informed about the consequences, actions taken and alternative procedures available) and response (policies in dealing with the whistle blower, relevant stakeholders and the media).

To facilitate the process of whistle blowing internally, which is the preferred option, organizations should have an effective internal system to raise concerns. This system should, inter alia, include:

- A clear statement that malpractice is taken seriously in the organization and an indication of what is seen as malpractice.
- Respect for the confidentiality of staff raising concerns and opportunities to raise issues outside the line management structure to other parties or to provide alternatives.
- Access to independent advice.
- Penalties for making false and malicious allegations.
- Guidelines on how to raise concerns outside the organization if deemed necessary.
- A demonstrable system for whistle blowing.
- Commitment by management to the whistle-blowing process and to support the whistle blower.
- Proper communication channels to document and address wrongdoing.

In addition, the following optional methods could be included (Butler, 2002; Vinten, 2000; Andrews, 1989):

- An internal committee could be established to take account of good practice and to facilitate the whistle-blowing process.
- An alternative is to establish and manage a hotline as most employees are afraid to report allegations to personnel in the organization itself.
- The use of itinerant company lawyers as the channel of communication.
- Setting up consumer advocates with independence and direct lines to the top.

If an internal whistle blowing strategy is not in place or if individuals feel that it is not safe and accepted to blow the whistle internally, they will blow the whistle externally to authorities, the media or wider. Outside disclosures not only raise ethical and legal issues of confidentiality and business secrecy, but also influence the relationship between the organization, the government and the media. Furthermore, outside disclosures will involve regulatory intervention and, at worst, unjustified unfavourable publicity. Because legal systems do not protect workers who blow the whistle outside, they will usually be made anonymously, which makes it difficult to investigate the allegations and may ultimately lead to blackmail, etc. (Borrie & Dehn, 2003).

6.1 Organizational response to whistle blowing

An organization can respond in several ways to whistle blowing (Near & Miceli, 1985; Kolarska & Aldrich, 1980; Parmerlee, Near & Jensen, 1982; Borrie & Dehn, 2003):

- Acknowledge and correct the wrongdoing and reward the whistle blower or do-gooder.
- Attempt to co-opt the whistle blower to buy compliance.

- Isolate the whistle blower from others to prevent the flow of information.
- The organization may challenge the credibility of the whistle blower, thereby decreasing the amount of public attention.
- The organization may retaliate in a punitive way as an example to other whistle blowers.
- The organization may help identify who is accountable for what and to whom.

According to Borrie and Dehn (2003), a whistle-blowing culture should be established in the organization that is concerned with raising and addressing corruption and wrongdoing in the organization or with the responsible person, and the whistle blower should be seen as a witness, not a complainant. Furthermore, organizations should have communication channels designed for grievances and complaints. An effective whistle-blowing culture will provide designated authority, encourage managers to be receptive to concerns about corruption and deal with it properly, and introduce a carefully developed structure based on impartial advice, internal whistle-blowing channels, and much more.

7. CONCLUSION

It is clear that a shift in the whistle-blowing culture of an organization is needed. It is proposed that whistle blowing should be viewed as a communication phenomenon and that the organization should ensure that it has a communication strategy and internal structure in place. Instead of organizations where individuals turn a blind eye or do not want to become involved in these problems, organizations should facilitate the whistle-blowing process to ensure that individuals take responsibility by facilitating and providing accountable measures to ensure that whistle blowers are praised, not penalized, for their actions to ensure the positive image of an organization. Consequently, it is imperative that a distinction is made between the whistle blower as a wrongdoer or do-gooder.

Various measures initiated by the government, including anti-corruption legislation and legislation for the development of more efficient monitoring and management whistle-blowing systems, have been accentuated in this article. In addition, the auditors, KPMG Durban, have promised to *put an end to officials failing to report activities* of abuse, theft, kick-backs, fraud and nepotism (Jenvey, 2003), which could be seen as a positive step in support of whistle blowing.

Whistle blowing is about seeing the truth of things for what they are and holding out for the truth in spite of discomfort. This is in support of the words of Shakespeare: *If I am unfriendly then I am at least true to myself, and therefore not false to anyone else*; or Aristotle: *we become just by doing just acts*.

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