Factors Influencing Whistle-Blowing in South African Local Government

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Abstract

Whistle blowing can be considered a key tool for fighting corruption, encouraging good governance, accountability and transparency in the public sector.

Our main research objective was to gain a better sense of variables influencing employees' intentions to blow the whistle within South African local government

A survey document was sent to South African local governments. Respondents were required to indicate their opinions on a five point lickert scale. Principal component Factor analysis was applied to the data. The findings are consistent with previous research into whistle blowing. The need to blow the whistle is reduced if an organization's control system is seen to have integrity and is perceived as a deterrent against maleficent behaviours.

Introduction

First coined in the 1970's (Near and Miceli, 1985) whistle blowing became an accepted term over the years (Dworkin and Near, 1997; Near and Miceli 1985, 1996). Whistle blowing is generally defined as "The confession by organisational members (ex- or current) of immoral, illegal or illegitimate practices under the control of their employers to persons and organisations that may be able to effect action" (Near and Miceli, 1985, p. 4). Whistle blowing can therefore be considered a key tool for fighting corruption, encouraging good governance, accountability and transparency in the public sector. Whistleblowers are often regarded as "traitors" by those engaged in corrupt behaviour, however, undertaking a "principled disclosure of wrong doing" is

sometimes considered to be an act of loyalty (Uys, 2004) to the organisation and in the public interest.

Due to a unique history South Africa provides an interesting case study in public service whistle blowing. The nation was able to move from one of the world's most repressive societies into a democracy through a peaceful transition which is one of the most remarkable success stories of the 20th century (Pillay, 2004, 2008; Samaratunge & Pillay, 2011) However, South Africa still suffers from high levels of crime and corruption, and there are also concerns about accountability and sustainable growth (Lewis and Uys, 2007). In this context it is important to understand the means of challenging corruption; in particular whistleblowing.

Study objectives

Whilst there is a wealth of research suggesting that effective whistle blowing combats corruption (Mac Nab et al, 2007; Hwang et al, 2008; De Maria, 2008), there is a dearth of literature on factors influencing people's intentions to blow the whistle, particularly in developing countries. The purpose of this exploratory study was to examine the factors that influence people's intention to blow the whistle in South African local government. In particular the role of (i) morality;(ii) barriers or risks attached to whistle blowing; (iii) organizational support; and (iv) demographical influences were explored.

The other studies undertaken on whistle blowing in South Africa were those conducted by Uys in 2004, 2005, 2008, 2011. This work has confirmed that South African whistle blowers risk significant retaliation. In narrative interviews, all 18 whistle-blower respondents reported having experienced various forms of

victimisation from their employer, including loss of work, and inability to find new employment.

To date, the antecedents studied include; role responsibility (Miceli and Near, 2002), status in organisation (Brewer and Seiden, 1998), education (Mesmer-Magnus and Viswesvaran, 2005), gender (Sims and Keenan, 1998), age (Zhang, Chiu and Wei, 2009a and 2009b), tenure (Dworkin and Baucus, 1998), attachment and satisfaction with job (Brewer and Seiden, 1998), personal morality (Keenan, 2000), emotions (Henik, 2008), locus of control (Miceli and Near, 1992), culture (Tavakoli, Keenan and Crijak-Karanovic, 2003), religion (Barnett, Bass and Brown, 1996) and fear of retaliation (Keenan, 1995).

The individual antecedents are supported by situational antecedents such as perceived support (King, 1997), organisational justice/climate (Goldman, 2001; Seifert, 2006), organisational values/culture (Rothwell and Baldwin 2007; Zhang et al., 2009a), severity of wrongdoing (Lee, Heilmann and Near, 2004) and whether ethics programs had been provided by the organization. (Jackson, 2000).

In this study we focus on participants' sense of morality, organizational loyalty, perceptions of organizational control systems, fear of retaliation and culture as it is believed these antecedents have a significant influence on an individual's intention to blow the whistle. In addition, the situational antecedent of perceived organizational support was also examined.

Corruption in South Africa

Corruption is a critical issue for South Africa. The 2010 corruption perception index states that South Africa at 4.5, with 10 being the least corrupt and 1 being the most corrupt (www.transparency.org/policy_research).

Corruption is evident in a post apartheid South Africa. Secrecy, collusion, lack of enforcement of disciplinary measures, lack of commitment to public service and unethical behaviour are commonly considered as contributory factors to corruption (Mafunisa, 2008:16). The existence of these factors has lead to a loss of moral authority, increased opportunities for organised crime, higher taxpayer burdens and weakened political decisions which lead to inefficient use of public resources and poor service delivery (Caiden, 1979:295 in Mafunisa, 2008:16). Although democracy has made government less secretive, many argue departments, such as those concerned with security and homelands, have cultures supporting corruption that were established during apartheid. However, new avenues for corruption, associated with new sources of public finance and political affiliations, have emerged in the post-apartheid years (Mafunisa, 2000, Dorasamy, 2010). The susceptibility to corruption of South Africa's public sector has been exacerbated by administrative decentralization and the importation of results-oriented business principles into public administration (Dorasamy, 2010; Fitzgerald,1997; Mafunisa, 2000). The prevalence of corruption suggests that there are few effective means of countering corruption prompting a need to develop an understanding of anti-corruption behaviours such as whistle blowing.

South Africa is a geographically large unitary state. Its public sector is divided into three spheres - central, provincial and local. There are currently nine provinces and 283 municipalities in the country (Reddy and Maharaj, 2008). The Government has embarked on several initiatives to curb corruption and promote public accountability through inter alia, the introduction of the Promotion of Access to Information Act and the hosting of three conferences on corruption in November 1998; April 1999 and October 1999 (www.nacf.org.za). One of the resolutions taken at the Anti –

Corruption Summit held in April 1999 made specific reference to *"developing, encouraging and implementing whistle – blowing mechanisms, which includes measures to protect persons from victimisation where they expose corruption and unethical practices"* (Public Service Commission, undated: 2).

Given its controversial nature, whistle - blowing can cause responses including ostracism, character assignation, prolonged legal battles and negative publicity.

Diale (2010) believes that history and the potential to avoid possible disasters prompted action to ensure legal protection for individual whistleblowers from governments around the world. The resultant effect was the mushrooming of whistle – blower legislation internationally including South Africa. The introduction of the Protected Disclosures Act in February 2001 was a significant development in the fight against corruption and the protection of whistleblowers. It was based on the Public Interest Disclosure Act, 1998 in the United Kingdom which was introduced following several high profile disasters that resulted in loss of lives (Public Service Commission, undated:6). It covered both the public and private sectors. The South African Act is viewed as part of the human rights culture enshrined in the Interim and Final Constitution which places emphasis on the "right to access" and "disclose information" (Johannessen in Holtzhausen and Ariecombe,2008: 32).

The Protected Disclosures Act

Prior to 2000 there was no mechanism or processes in place to protect staff courageous enough to engage in whistle blowing. Public servants who raised concerns in the workplace about issues of corruption, fraud, nepotism, maladministration or any other activity which constitutes an offence prejudicial to the public interest were provided with only limited protection under previous legislation. However, the

ushering in of the Protected Disclosures Act, 2000 (Act 26 of 2000) created a new culture whereby all employees in public and private bodies could disclose information of criminal and other irregular conduct in the workplace in a responsible manner (Section 2 of the Act). The intention of the Act was to promote a secure, enabling environment in which someone who knew or suspected that something was wrong could report it to a relevant and capable authority empowered to investigate illegal behaviour.

Holtzhausen and Ariecombe (2008) add that another key dimension of the Act was to create a declaratory objective, that: *"the law should create a safe legal environment for disclosures and therefore create a culture where the disclosure will be listened to in a responsible manner and the messenger treated with respect and not be ridiculed"*.

Conceptual Analysis: Antecedents to Whistle Blowing

Recent research indicates that morality is an important antecednt to whistle blowing. According to Hwang et al. (2008) and Chiu (2002, 2003), among the top two motivators for whistle blowing in China were personal morality and professional ethics. In their study of professional accountants in China Hwang et al. (2008) identified professional ethics, personal morality and obedience to organisational policy as significant motivators for whistle blowing. In a study of adult college students, Sims and Keenan (1998) reported similar findings with specific regard to personal morality. Two years later, Keenan (2000) offered additional evidence for a relationship between moral perceptions of managers at all levels and the likelihood of blowing the whistle.

Barriers

The literature suggests that persons with a fear of media and attention, or a fear of retaliation by the organisation, their immediate supervisors, or co-workers, are much less likely to be whistle-blowers than employees who do not perceive a retaliatory environment (Hwang et al., 2008; Keenan, 1995; King, 1999; Near and Miceli, 1996). Cultural influence is also regarded as a significant second barrier to people's intention to blow the whistle. Specifically, uncertainty avoidance, which is described as the extent to which individuals or employees feel threatened by unknown or uncertain situations (Hofstede, 1980) is thought to be a factor in deciding not to blow the whistle (Sims and Keenan, 1999).

Cross-cultural research suggests that high uncertainty avoidance cultures are more likely to consider an unethical or illegal violation as severe (Sims and Keenan, 1999), and hence are expected to have higher propensities to whistle-blow (MacNab et al, 2007; Tavakoli et al., 2003; Weaver, 2001).

Uys (2008) conducted 18 qualitative interviews in South Africa and developed a model of rational loyalty (loyalty to greater societal good, rather than one's organisation) based on the argument that organisational loyalty often overshadows rational loyalty in South Africa. Previous studies demonstrate that monetary rewards, job security, one's status in an organisation and many other variables thought to create organisational loyalty are never significant enough to reduce one's intention toward whistle blowing (e.g. Brewer and Seiden, 1998; Hwang et al., 2008). Nevertheless, organizational loyalty does exist and may be regarded as a third barrier to whistle blowing.

Organisational Support

The fourth barrier to whistle blowing is related to the level of confidence in the organizational systems established to detect and deal with wrongdoing (De Maria, 2005). A comprehensive literature review of whistle blowing antecedents by Mesmer-Magnus and Viswesvaran (2005) confirmed that perceptions of the organisational climate for whistle blowing are related to intentions to whistle blowing (Berry, 2004). In particular whistle blowing is more likely when there is a supportive organizational climate. In addition it can be argued that the collective norms, values and confidence and trust found in an organization contribute to organizational support and would be likely to affect the whistle blowing intention of individuals within that organisation. (Miceli and Near, 1985, 1988; Rothschild and Miethe, 1999; Seifert, 2006; Sims and Keenan, 1998; Treviño and Youngblood, 1990),

Corruption is a significant problem in South Africa impeding the development of democratic institutions and growth of the economy. Curbing corruption requires an understanding of the antecedent conditions that encourage mechanisms, such as whistle blowing. Exploring the conditions required to encourage whistle blowing would suggest possible changes that could be made in South African public sector organizations. In addition such research will confirm or question the current state of knowledge concerning whistle blowing.

Methodology

A survey document was given to local government staff working who attended a Public Administration class at the University of Kwa-Zulu Natal, South Africa. The survey instrument consisted of six sections (Sections A to F) Factor analysis was applied to responses given to statements in Sections B and C. Respondents were required to indicate their opinions on a seven point likert scale to statements relating

to the respondent's attitude to statements regarding the encouragement to whistle blow (Section B) and statements concerning the discouragement of whistle blowing (Section C). Principal component Factor analysis was applied to the data. There were 200 useable responses.

Results

The survey instrument used to capture the data had a high internal validity indicated by a Kronbach alpha of 0.799. The analysis produced six factors without cross loadings. Five statements loaded onto the first factor. The first statement (*People avoid uncertainty and feel the need for security*) {.746} centred on respondent's priority of avoiding uncertainty and maintaining a sense of security over whistle blowing. The second statement (*People are less willing to take risks associated with the unknown*) {.869} indicated an unwillingness to take risks, such as blowing the whistle, when faced with unknown consequences. The belief that people are more inclined to take care of themselves was indicated by the third statement (*People tend to look after themselves and their immediate families only, rather than belong to groups and taking care of each other in exchange for loyalty*){.854}. While the fourth statement (*The dominant values in society are success, money and material status, rather than the quality of life*) {.843} expressed the belief that of success, money and material status were the dominant values that respondents would be reluctant to jeapordize by whistle blowing. The final statement (*Time as a resource is not used efficiently*) {.838} indicated that whistle blowing is adversely affected by the respondent's perception that whistle blowing was likely to be a cumbersome process using up time, a resource that was already being used inefficiently and adversely affecting the respondents ability to function effectively. The first factor centred on the respondent's perception of how whistle blowing could affect their ability to maintain

their position at work and community. This factor was labelled *survival* and indicated that perceived risks and concerns about personal survival will influence an individual's willingness to whistle blow.

Four statements loaded onto the *second factor*. The first statement (*I would not be a whistle blower because my religion frowns upon it*) {.853} indicated that respondents believed a person may not whistle blow because of religious believes. The second read that a person's moral conscience would not allow whistle blowing (*I would not be a whistle blower because my religion frowns upon it*) {.813}. This was followed by the third statement (*I would not be a whistle blower because I would feel like I am betraying my organization*) {.706} which suggested that a person would not blow the whistle if it was seen as not supporting the organisation. The final statement revolved around the distribution of power in the organisation (*I would not be a whistle blower because power in organisations and institutions is distributed unequally. i.e., people obey the orders of their superiors without questioning, and low level employees follow orders as a matter of procedure*) {.561}. The second factor captures the point that whistle blowing could be discouraged by the norms held by an individual.

Three statements load onto the *third factor*. The first statement suggests(*I would whistle blow to receive monetary reward or promotion*) {.694} that people would whistle blow if their organization provided material gain; thus actively encouraging whistle blowing. The second statement (*I would be a whistle blower because of the encouragement of my peers*) {.841} suggests that continued support from one's peers would make the decision to blow the whistle easier. However, the usual experience of whistle blowers is isolation from their peers. The final statement (I would be a whistle blower because of reasonable job protection as provided by laws and regulations)

{.767} indicates that the fear of losing one's job is a significant barrier to whistle blowing. The third factor is titled encouragement by organizational incentives.

The *fourth factor* comprises of three statements that imply that whistle blowing intentions are influenced by: (i) general sense of morality (*I would be a whistle blower because of my general sense of morality*) {.885}; (ii) social justice and professional ethics (*I would be a whistle blower because of social justice and professional ethics*) {.853}. The third statement (*I would be a whistle blower to abide by the policy of my organisation*) {.640} indicates respondents would blow the whistle if it meant complying with their organisation's policy. The fourth factor is referred to as supporting culture.

Three statements load onto the *fifth factor*. The first statement (*I would not be a whistle blower if I would receive attention from the media*) {.792}. indicates that people are discouraged from whistle blowing if they expect attention form the media They are also concerned about the retaliation from within the organisation (*I would not be a whistle blower because my organisation might retaliate against me*) {.789}. The final statement (*I would not be a whistle blower because the person/s involved in the illegal, immoral or illegitimate practices might retaliate against me*) {.725} points to a fear retaliation from individuals involved in malfeasant behaviour as a barrier to whistle blowing. We have named this factor fear of attention.

The final factor comprises two statements. The first statement (*I would not be a whistle blower if my organisation had a strong internal control system*) {.865}.indicates that respondents did not see the need to blow the whistle if strong

organisational control systems were in place. The second statement (*I would <u>not</u> be a whistle blower if my organisation operated under a strong legal system, in which illegal, immoral or illegitimate practices are routinely prosecuted by legitimate outside authorities*) suggests that respondents would not see the need to blow the whistle if the organisation actively used the legal system to pursue illegitimate practices {892}.We have named this factor effectiveness of control systems.

Discussion and Conclusions

The factor analysis revealed six factors that will influence whistle blowing. They include: (1) whistle blowing is discouraged by concerns about survival, (2) whistle blowing can be discouraged by norms held by an individual, (3) whistle blowing encouraged by organizational incentives, (4) whistle blowing requires a supporting culture, (5) whistle blowing is discouraged by fear of attention, (6) the need to whistle blow is reduced if the control systems are effective.

Factors 1, 2and 5 suggest that whistle blowing is unlikely to occur if individuals are concerned about lack of promotion, keeping a job, or if the individual's moral code emphasises loyalty to the organization and if the individual is concerned about notoriety. However, whistle blowing is more likely to occur if an organization uses incentives to encourage whistle blowing and has a supportive culture. These findings are consistent with previous research the last factor, however, has received little attention. The need to blow the whistle is reduced if an organization's control system is seen to have integrity and is perceived as a deterrent against maleficent behaviours.

There are a number of recommendations that can be made as a result of the findings made in this study. First, an organization must have a clear policy of supporting whistle blowers that is consistent with the law. The organization's culture must be

supportive of whistle blowers. In addition an organization's control systems must reduce the need for whistle blowing but also counter the power held by those participating in malfeasant behaviour.

The findings presented in this paper were based on quantitative data gathered through a survey from respondents working in South African local government and may not be able to reveal the dynamics involved in the decision to blow the whistle. This may be overcome by employing a case study approach that could also determine whether similar findings were found in different contexts.

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Rotated Component Matrix

	1	2	3	4	5	6
Social justice and ethics	.020	-.134	-.170	**.853**	.039	.071
General sense of morality	.020	-.139	-.017	**.885**	.044	-.037
Monetary reward or promotion	.022	.225	**.694**	-.009	.032	-.058
Policy of organization	.054	-.144	.348	.640	-.175	.037
Encouragement of peers	.004	-.034	**.841**	.040	.091	-.027
Job protection	.102	.075	**.767**	-.024	-.029	.027
Strong internal control system	.088	.154	.009	.002	.075	**.865**
Strong legal system	.007	.001	-.062	.052	.039	**.862**
Receive attention from media	.085	-.011	.031	.028	**.792**	.169
Organization might retaliate	.236	.323	.042	.031	**.789**	-.013
Persons involved might retaliate	.297	.357	.017	-.153	**.725**	-.055
Religion frowns upon it	.078	**.853**	.058	-.175	.138	.027
Moral consciousness	.057	**.813**	-.076	-.179	.166	.073
Betraying organization	.125	**.706**	.192	-.126	.010	.210
Power unevenly distributed	.205	**.561**	.227	.033	.254	-.125
People avoid uncertainty	**.746**	.129	.077	-.025	.205	-.029
Less willing to take risks with unknown	**.869**	-.029	.022	-.054	.200	.038
People look after themselves only	**.854**	.123	.162	-.028	.078	.022
Dominant society values	**.834**	.141	.021	.150	.073	.018
Time not used efficiently	**.838**	.086	-.069	.051	.029	.087