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Commentary

What Makes Whistleblowers So Threatening?

Comment on "Cultures of Silence and Cultures of Voice: The Role of Whistleblowing in Healthcare Organisations"

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Abstract

Whistleblowing is defined by the retaliation that those who speak out receive. Why some organizations find it almost impossible not to retaliate depends more on the properties of the organization than the act of the individual whistleblower. These properties are, to greater or lesser degree, present in all organizations. Not all organizations retaliate against whistleblowers, but the whistleblower represents a threat to every organization. And to every individual within the organization, because the whistleblower challenges the morality and ethics of the rest of us.

Keywords: Whistleblowers, Whistleblowing, Organizational Structure, "Commit the Truth"

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Over a decade ago, I published a book, *Whistleblowers: Broken Lives and Organizational Power*.[1] I began the research for my book thinking I wanted to know why whistleblowers do it, what makes them different from the rest of us? Eventually, I figured out that this is the wrong question. What makes whistleblowers different is that they blow the whistle. Beyond that it is hard to generalize, though one can make some broad statements. One study of whistleblowers (not a very good one) showed that they are among the least sensitive to social cues.

Mannion and Davis[2] understand that the real question about whistleblowing is not about why the whistleblower does it, but why the organization responds as it does. Whistleblowing cannot be understood outside its organizational context. Whistleblowing is an ecosystem, not just the act of an individual.

I have no disagreement with the authors' definition of whistleblowing. "Employee whistleblowing – loosely, the disclosure to a person or public body, outside normal channels and management structures, of information concerning unsafe, unethical or illegal practices…." The point I think they could emphasize is that organizations have it within their power to have no whistleblowers. Almost every act of whistleblowing is the result of organizational failure.

Whistleblowers are defined by the retaliation they receive. Consider the following scenario. A nurse observes that both doctors and nurses are often careless about washing their hands when going from patient to patient. The nurse speaks to the head of nursing, who speaks to whomever he or she reports to at the hospital. Soon enough mandatory sessions on hand washing are held, alcohol dispensers are placed in every patient room, etc. The nurse continues at his job. No act of whistleblowing has taken place. None will ever be recognized and recorded. The nurse has done his job, and so has the organization.

In practice, whistleblowing is defined almost entirely by the retaliation exacted on the whistleblower. Serious fraud and unethical or wantonly careless practices exist, and need to be brought to light. We will always need people who speak out when most are silent. How many of those who speak out go on to become whistleblowers depends on the response of the organization.

A troubling aspect of the retaliation that whistleblowers receive is that much of it comes from their peers. Mannion and Davis make this point clearly. Only a third of doctors, they report, say their colleagues supported their decision to speak out. Much retaliation has to do with fear. The fear is so primitive it would not be mistaken to call it fear of contamination. The anthropologist Mary Douglas uses the term "slimy" to capture the fear of one who will not stay in his place, or rather, one whose place we do not even know.[3] It is what every organization most fears: that someone inside represents the interests of outside, that the organization cannot control its own boundaries. One whistleblower's colleagues accused her of not being a "team player." The language is banal, but the sentiment it primordial, reflecting the deepest fears of the organizational man or woman.

We vastly underestimate the degree of our own cowardice and submission. Everything you need to know about whistleblowing you learned in secondary school. Above all how it feels to be left out of the group, excluded, rejected. What it is like to walk into the school cafeteria and be left to sit alone. What it is like to be mocked or bullied. This is the most feared retaliation of all, and most do not even know it. It is why we are so ambivalent about whistleblowers. Are not they really just whiners and malcontents? For if they are not, then the whistleblower reveals by contrast the cowardice of us all.

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Many whistleblowers I have spoken with state that they were not terribly surprised that they made the boss unhappy. Many expected retaliation. What they did not expect was that people with whom they had worked for twenty or thirty years would cross the hall, look away, not sit with them in the company cafeteria, not take their telephone calls. As one whistleblower pointed out, during twenty years at a demanding job he had spent more time with his colleagues than his family. Yet, once he blew the whistle his colleagues pretended that he did not exist. If you want to encourage or support whistleblowing, take a whistleblower to lunch. I am serious. You will learn something, and you will be doing your part to overcome the fear that whistleblowers strike into the rest of us.

Daniel Ellsberg, the most famous whistleblower in the world, at least until Edward Snowden came along (Ellsberg leaked the Pentagon Papers, a secret history of the Vietnam War, to the newspapers), said that his former friends and colleagues regarded him with neither admiration nor censure, but with wonder, as though he were a space-walking astronaut who had cut his lifeline to the mother ship. What was his mothership? Was it the academic-military-industrial complex, the system, the organization? Call it what you will, it is not so much a precise concept as an overwhelming feeling experienced by many whistleblowers. It is this feeling that keeps the rest of us in line.

I have talked to South Koreans about whistleblowing as part of another research project.[4] Though it is changing rapidly, South Koreans still live in a group-oriented culture. They understood what they were willing to give up in order to belong. My experience is that Westerners are generally willing to give up the same degree of autonomy, they just do not understand or admit it. Whistleblowers confront us with our own groupishness, and we do not like it. Sometimes we turn them into heroes, but we remain deeply ambivalent.

Groupishness is part of organizational culture, and Mannion and Davis are right to constantly return to it as the question we should be addressing. The question is from what perspective. From a sociology of organizations perspective, the moral individual is the problem. Zygmunt Bauman says that all social organization:

> "consists in subjecting the conduct of its units to either instrumental or procedural criteria of evaluation…. All social organization consists therefore in neutralizing the disruptive and deregulating impact of moral behavior."[5]

The book this quotation is taken from is titled *Modernity and the Holocaust*. Bauman's argument is not that all organizations are evil, but that there is something about the modern organization, no matter what its goal, including healthcare, that regards the moral individual as a threat to its autonomy. After I was fired, said one whistleblower, no one else would hire me. They were all afraid of someone who might "commit the truth." In other words, organizations are afraid of men and women who remember that they are first of all citizens who belong to an entity larger than the organization. As citizens, their first responsibility is to patients, taxpayers, the affected public. Every act, practice, and ritual promoting institutional loyalty is at the same time an attempt to persuade its members to think of themselves as first and foremost citizens of the organization.

A refreshing aspect of Mannion and Davis' editorial is that they suggest no quick fixes, no anonymous complaint telephone numbers or websites and so forth. Instead, they tell us that our perspective is often wrong. "We would contend that much thinking about whistle blowing misconstrues it as something separate from normal organisational functioning, and so misses a broader opportunity to consider voice and silence… in organisational settings."

They are correct, and the question is how to consider organizational functioning. In my view, the most fruitful perspective is one that sees almost all organizations as seeking autonomy from their environment. It is this that makes the moral individual so threatening, for the moral individual remains a citizen of a larger republic.

What Is To Be Done?

The first step is to take seriously Mannion and Davis' observation that whether someone who speaks out is a hero or a malcontent hinges less on the facts of the case and more on "discursive power," the power to control the narrative. "Nuts and sluts" is the term a number of whistleblowers reluctantly educated in the process have come to call this control. They mean that the practice of the organization is not to talk about the whistleblower's assertion; the goal is to devalue the whistleblower by finding him or her emotionally unstable or morally suspect. "They wouldn't talk to me about it," said one whistleblower referring to his accusation. "And they wouldn't talk to me about not talking about it. All they would talk about was why I had gone outside of normal channels." It drives some whistleblowers crazy.

Mannion and Davis point out an obvious but important fact: whistleblowing often does not work. Many of the whistleblowers I have spoken with (almost one hundred) agreed that they were ineffective in initiating change. When I asked them why they did it, most said they had no choice. They woke up one morning and knew they had to speak out. Frequently this is after many years of saying nothing. "It was speak up or stroke out," said one. "It finally got to be too much."

Our societies are fortunate that there are people who are unable not to speak out. We depend on them, for much organizational wrongdoing is visible only by people on the inside who are in a position to document it. "I am afflicted by my imagination for consequences," said one whistleblower who was concerned about an improperly secured contaminated landfill. He imagined children playing there. In the end, we depend upon those we are unable or unwilling to protect from the consequences of their own acts.[6]

The morality of our organizations depends, in significant measure, on the fact that there are people unable not to sacrifice themselves, for most whistleblowers experience retaliation. From one perspective this is to be expected. As I stated earlier, no retaliation, no whistleblower. From another perspective, remembering that one is a citizen while working in an organization should not ordinarily require an act of great heroism and self-sacrifice. Today it frequently does.

Ethical issues

Not applicable.

Competing interests

Author declares that he has no competing interests.

Author's contribution

CFA is the single author of the manuscript.

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