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Whistleblowing Dilemma: Why Many Choose Silence Over Disclosure

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Whistleblowing is recognised as an important internal control mechanism for discovering unethical behaviour within an organisation. From a layman's perspective, whistleblowing refers to reporting unfavourable actions to someone who has the authority to address them. It sounds easy, but the willingness of an individual or members of an organisation, including Malaysian organisations, to be a whistleblower is still considered low (Nawawi & Salin, 2019). Therefore, let's explore whistleblowing and examine why people are often reluctant to use it despite its advantages in controlling unethical behaviour.

Generally, whistleblowing is the act of reporting a hidden or wrongful activity to an organisation or governmental agency (Bishop-Monroe et al., 2021). The term was derived from the practice of English police officers blowing their whistles when criminal behaviour was observed to alert other officers. There are four common elements related to whistleblowing: receiving party, whistleblower, perpetrator, and disclosure/complaint.

Undeniably, whistleblowing plays a crucial role in maintaining organisations' integrity and accountability. Whistleblowing serves as an internal check on malpractices as it is concerned with exposing illegal activities in the workplace that safeguard the organization and its stakeholders from substantial financial and reputational damage (Nwoke, 2019). This is because, early report from whistleblower assists the organisation to address misconduct before it becomes public. Apart from that, whistleblowing also helps organisations to operate more effectively as it demotivates employees from non-compliance activities, which eventually leads to adherence to moral and legal obligations (Friedrich and Quick, 2024).

Nevertheless, the act of reporting and disclosing of unethical behaviour is always being threatened, and thus many potential whistleblowers remain silent. Here, six (6) prominent reasons were identified why people hesitate to come forward and blow the whistle:



Fear of Retaliation: A major reason for reluctance to whistle blow is the fear of retaliation, including job loss, demotion, and other forms of professional and personal harm. Research indicates that despite legal protections, the fear of being targeted remains a significant deterrent.



Lack of evidence: Whistleblower hesitate to come forward as they are fear to be burden to provide a concrete evidence. They are afraid if the failure to give sufficient information cause misunderstanding and eventually tarnish their reputation.



Loyalty and Fairness Dilemma: Whistleblowers often face a moral conflict between loyalty to their organization and the ethical imperative to report wrongdoing. This trade off can create significant emotional and psychological stress, leading many to choose silence over action.



Perceived Ineffectiveness: Some individuals believe that their efforts to report wrongdoing will not lead to meaningful change. This perceived ineffectiveness reduces their motivation to blow the whistle, as they doubt that their actions will result in any positive outcome.



Lack of Support: Many potential whistleblowers feel unsupported by their organizations, both before and after reporting misconduct. This lack of institutional backing discourages individuals from coming forward, as they fear being left to face the consequences alone.



Personal and Social Consequences: The personal and social repercussions of whistleblowing, such as strained relationships with colleagues, social isolation, and the stigma of being a whistleblower, further contribute to the reluctance to report misconduct.

As a resolution to the fear of retaliation and adverse consequences, a whistleblower protection law has been introduced to safeguard those who report unethical activities. For instance, in Malaysia, the Whistleblower Protection Act 2010 provides a comprehensive framework to protect those who report improper behaviour. Japan also uses the same act, introduced in 2004, called the Whistleblower Protection Act 2004. Meanwhile, The United States refers to the Sarbanes-Oxley Act (SOX) 2002, which provides robust protection to whistleblowers. Despite differences in terminology, all these acts include provisions to protect whistleblowers from retaliation, ensuring they can report misconduct without fear of losing their jobs or facing other forms of retribution.

References

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