Chapter 5

Systemic Factors Moderating Whistle-Blowing

Introduction

Corruption and concerns around ethics have perpetuated through history, heavily influenced by ineffective whistle-blowing processes and systems. Corruption has afflicted all forms of institutions and government and remains one of the most important challenges to the moral basis of developed and developing democracies. Whistle-blowing is an ethical issue based on the value systems of a nation. Its effectiveness requires total commitment and concerted efforts by government and civil society to examine cultural influences on such acts. There is no doubt that reluctance around whistle-blowing poses a particularly serious danger to newly democratized countries such as South Africa.

This chapter is structured in four parts. First a brief overview is provided of scholarly advancements around the conception of whistle-blowing. Second, South Africa’s institutional context and task environments are described to illustrate the country’s characteristics. The chapter does this by examining the country’s socioeconomic and political legacy. Third, using the constructs of various cultural theorists, the chapter examines South Africa’s cultural characteristics. Such cultural characteristics and influences are visible in institutional and task environments. Fourth, it examines the findings from the survey data followed by a discussion on some of the challenges around whistle-blowing.

Over the years many definitions have advanced around whistle-blowing. Some definitions have focused on activities outside the organization
while others have examined the act from the perspective of loyalty (Uys, 2008). Definitions of whistle-blowing date back to the early 1970s with Nader et al. (1972, vii) defining the act of whistle-blowing as “the act of a man or woman who, believing that the public interest overrides the interest of the organisation he (sic) serves, publicly blows the whistle if the organisation is involved in corrupt, illegal, fraudulent or harmful activity.” Westin (1981) later extended this definition by focusing on the specific actions and its effect on the whistle-blowers’s life: “whistle blowers as well known, are employees who believe their organisation is engaged in illegal, dangerous or unethical conduct. Usually, they try to have such conduct corrected through inside complaint, but if it is not, the employee turns to government authorities or the media. Usually whistle blowers get fired. Sometimes they may get reinstated. Almost always their experiences are traumatic, and their careers and lives are profoundly affected.” Many scholarly definitions have evolved since Nader’s definition and have offered multiple perspectives (Miceli and Near, 1984; 1988; 1989; 1994; 1995; Miceli et al., 1991; Miceli et al., 1998; Magnus & Viswesvaran, 2005; Near and Miceli, 1996). More recent is De Maria’s study in which an alliance is created between whistle-blowing and protesting (De Maria, 2008). Overall whistle-blowers are individuals who expose wrongdoing at great personal and professional risk (Dryburgh, 2009).

Such definitions reflect a myriad of characteristics related to the act of whistle-blowing such as morality, ethical profiling, psychological implications, varying conceptualizations of ethics, wrong and right, good and bad, organizational support, organizational commitment, and consequences. A whistle-blower’s decision to blow the whistle or not is also dependent on the country’s institutional context and task context. Various conceptualizations and models relevant to whistle-blowing lack the specificity around the task and institutional environments of a society and its influence on effective whistle-blowing. In South Africa whistle-blowing is a phenomenon embedded in a complex system, a system where individuals, organizational and societal characteristics dynamically interact and converge/diverge. This chapter develops a model that depicts these interactions as influences from the country’s national culture. This in turn results in outcomes that reflect a pursuit of conflicting goals.

In the following sections, the institutional and task environments of South Africa are examined that contribute to the integrative model we develop. The chapter examines the national cultural orientation of South Africa using the cultural constructs of various theorists. This assists us in developing propositions that we test through the findings from survey data.