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## INTERNAL VOICE MECHANISMS AND COMMUNICATION FROM EMPLOYEES ABOUT ETHICAL ISSUES

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Organizational theorists have long recommended open and supportive communication climates as a means to encourage upward communication from employees (Mayo 1937; Roethlisberger and Dickson 1939; Likert 1967, Redding 1972). Most researchers still view open communication as desirable, although it is not regarded as a panacea (Eisenberg and Witten 1987). Despite its generally beneficial effects, open communication is sometimes difficult because subordinates may be reluctant to share sensitive or negative information with their superiors. This may be especially true when subordinates are aware of possible violations of ethical standards by their co-workers, immediate supervisors, or superiors. Organizational "blocks," such as uncertainty about organizational priorities, skepticism about the effectiveness of internal disclosure, and fear of retaliation, may inhibit communication from employees about issues of ethics and morality (Waters 1978). In addition, employees may be uncertain as to legal protection available to them when they report their knowledge of the ethical violations of others.

Organizational leaders would seem to have a definite interest in removing such barriers so that employees feel free to share their concerns about sensitive legal and moral issues. By doing so, organizations may be able to avoid the negative consequences associated with external revelations of wrongdoing. Dworkin and Near (1987) point out that employees who disclose their knowledge of ethical problems internally provide organizations a chance to investigate and take corrective action.

This paper focuses on one potential way to encourage employees to communicate their concerns about perceived wrongdoing, the internal voice mechanism. An internal voice mechanism, as defined here, is any communication channel within the organization specifically designated as an appropriate channel for the expression of employees' concern about ethical and moral issues. Such voice mechanisms might include "open-door" policies, suggestion programs, designated human resources officers, ethics boards, organizational ombudsmen, and anonymous telephone "hotlines," among others (Graham 1986).

One purpose of such voice mechanisms is to encourage internal communication about sensitive issues, which, while they may not affect complainants personally, do violate their sense of ethics and morality. Graham (1986) points out that there are many types of voice mechanisms and that some may be more effective than others in encouraging internal disclosures.

This paper presents the results of an empirical study concerning the relationship between internal voice mechanisms and employees' internal disclosures about ethical and

moral issues. Two research hypotheses are tested using data collected from 208 human resource executives, representing organizations in various industries across the country. Results are discussed and implications are considered.

### **Theoretical Background and Research Hypotheses**

Employees have several alternatives when they become aware of wrongdoing within the organization. They may do nothing, either out of loyalty to the firm or fear of reprisals. They may leave the company in silent protest. Or they may engage in employee voice, a communication effort to "change, rather than escape from, an objectionable state of affairs" (Hirschman 1970; Graham 1986). Voiced concerns may be expressed through communication channels within the organization (internal whistleblowing). They may also be expressed to parties outside the organization such as regulatory agencies, law enforcement officials, and/or the media (external whistleblowing).

Employee whistleblowing is generally defined as the disclosure by organization members of illegal, immoral, or illegitimate practices under the control of their employers, to persons or organizations that may be able to effect action (Near and Miceli 1985). This definition has several crucial components. First, the subjects of whistleblowers' complaints are perceived violations of legal and/or ethical standards. Therefore, voicing disagreement about company policies that do not concern principled issues is not whistleblowing. Second, whistleblowers perceive that their employers have the ability to alter or stop the objectionable behavior. Third, whistleblowers may communicate their concerns to parties inside or outside the organization.

Several theoretical perspectives have been suggested as possible frameworks within which to study whistleblowing, including the principled dissent (Graham 1983; Graham 1986) and political behavior perspectives (Farrell and Petersen 1982). Currently, however, the most useful theoretical framework appears to be the prosocial behavior literature (Miceli and Near 1992). Prosocial behavior is positive social behavior intended to benefit others (Staub 1978). Prosocial behavior differs from pure altruism, which requires that an act be totally unselfish, voluntary, and result in good outcomes. Prosocial actors may have partially selfish motives, as their behaviors may benefit themselves as well as others, and may not always result in outcomes that society deems good (Staub 1978).

In an organizational context, prosocial behavior is behavior that is performed by an organizational member with the intent of promoting the welfare of the individual, group, or organization toward which it is directed (Brief and Motowidlo 1986). Whistleblowing can be considered a form of prosocial organizational behavior since whistleblowers generally act in an attempt to benefit individuals, the organization, or society-at-large (Dozier and Miceli 1985). However, whistleblowers also may be motivated by selfish, as well as altruistic motives. They may seek personal gain from their behavior. In addition, the act of whistleblowing may not always be entirely voluntary, as some individuals are required to report wrongdoing (internal auditors, for example). And finally, whistleblowing does not always result in good outcomes. Whistleblowers are sometimes mistaken, and innocent individuals may be accused. Therefore, whistleblowing appears to meet the re-

quirements of the prosocial behavior definition, but not the altruism standard (Dozier and Miceli 1985; Miceli and Near 1992).

As a form of prosocial behavior, whistleblowing is likely to be influenced by many of the same individual and contextual variables that impact on other types of prosocial behaviors. For example, research evidence suggests that personality variables influence the likelihood that an individual will engage in prosocial behavior (Smith, Organ, and Near 1983). Theoretically, these personality traits should affect the whistleblowing process as well (Miceli and Near 1992).

Since prosocial actors are likely to weigh the consequences to themselves and others of acting, situational variables may also influence their decision. Therefore, in an organizational context, variables such as the existence of role models, reinforcement contingencies, and organizational climate are possible antecedents to prosocial behavior (Brief and Motowidlo 1986). In general, organizational actions may serve several purposes in regard to prosocial behavior by employees. First, they may help employees clarify organizationally sanctioned behaviors. Second, they may provide employees with instructions as to how to behave prosocially. Third, may they increase the perceived efficacy of prosocial actions. And fourth, they may lessen employees' inhibitions to engage in prosocial behaviors.

Because whistleblowing is so controversial and sensitive, the signals sent by the organization are especially important. Employees are likely to be confused and unsure as to the appropriate behavior when confronted with behavior that they believe unethical, and they are likely to look to the organization for guidance. What can the organization do to assure employees that whistleblowing to appropriate parties within the organization wrongdoing is acceptable behavior?

First, the organization should ensure that employees understand that the organization is committed to an ethical business climate, and supports employees' good faith internal disclosures of possible unethical or illegal acts. One way in which many organizations attempt to do this is through ethics codes, which often contain clauses that encourage employees to report knowledge of wrongdoing. Evidence from one research study suggests that ethics codes that define the reporting of unethical behavior as a role responsibility may increase internal reporting of wrongdoing (Trevino and Victor 1992).

Second, to make their support of internal disclosures more concrete and to clarify the appropriate manner in which employees should report their ethical concerns, some organizations have begun to develop formal internal disclosure policies that specify in detail how employees should communicate their concerns and how the organization will respond (Barnett and Cochran 1991). Such policies should provide employees with behavioral guidelines when they are confronted with possible wrongdoing. They may also lead to greater confidence in the procedural justice of the disclosure process, which should encourage greater levels of communication (Victor, Trevino, and Shapiro 1993). Empirical studies indicate that policies may also increase employees' perception that the company encourages disclosures (Keenan 1990), and lead to an increase in internal disclosures and a decrease in external disclosures (Barnett, Cochran, and Taylor 1993). Also, overall levels of internal communication about perceived wrongdoing may be higher in organizations with formal policies than in organizations without such policies (Barnett, et al. 1993).

Third, research indicates that prosocial behaviors are influenced by the extent to which the individual involved believes that action will be efficacious (Dozier and Miceli 1985; Miceli and Near 1992). Empirical research suggests that the perceived responsiveness of organizations to employee concerns is associated with internal whistleblowing (Miceli and Near 1984; Miceli and Near 1988; Miceli and Near 1992; Miceli, Roach, and Near 1988). Organizations may be able to influence employees' perceptions of their responsiveness by creating formal internal disclosure policies (Keenan 1990; Barnett, et al. 1993).

Finally, organizations should attempt to break down employees' inhibitions about communicating their ethical concerns. Studies indicate that many whistleblowers suffer reprisals at the hands of individuals within their organizations (Jos, Tompkins, and Hays 1989; Miceli and Near 1989). Research suggests that protecting employees from retaliation may be essential to an effective internal disclosure process (Graham 1986; Near and Miceli 1985).

Perhaps the key component of internal disclosure policies are the voice mechanisms through which employees are to communicate their concerns. Internal disclosure policies are likely to be ineffective if they do not designate specific voice mechanisms. Empirical research suggests that policies should provide employees with several alternative communication channels. For example, Spencer (1986) examined the relationship between the number of available internal voice mechanisms in several hospitals and the perceived effectiveness of the hospitals' problem resolution processes. Employees in hospitals with a higher total number of voice mechanisms had a significantly higher perception of the effectiveness of the internal disclosure procedure. Organizations whose internal disclosure policies include multiple internal voice mechanisms explicitly recognize factors that may inhibit employees from using certain communication channels.

For example, some employees may have good relations with their superiors, and these employees may not hesitate to discuss sensitive issues with their supervisors. But other employees may feel inhibited in speaking to their superiors or may wish to voice concerns about actions of their superiors. These employees will probably be more likely to utilize voice mechanisms that allow them to disclose their concerns outside the chain of command. Employees who are concerned about reprisals may be more likely to use anonymous voice mechanisms, such as telephone "hotlines." Spencer (1986) concludes that ". . . when employees have many opportunities to voice dissent they appear to be predisposed to take advantage . . . and appear to consider procedures for problem resolution effective."

Therefore, based on the preceding discussion, the following research hypothesis is offered:

**Research Hypothesis 1- In companies with formal internal disclosure policies, a higher number of alternative voice mechanisms will be positively associated with a higher perceived level of communication about ethical and moral issues.**

It seems reasonable that the type of voice mechanism is also important in terms of influencing employees to report wrongdoing (Graham 1986). One type of voice mecha-

nism that may be particularly effective allows those who disclose ethical problems to remain anonymous. As noted previously, evidence suggests that employees who make sensitive disclosures often suffer negative consequences, making it imperative that organizations remove this barrier to internal communication. Some of the more common forms of retaliation include ostracism, undesirable transfer, demotion, and even termination (Parmerlee, Near, and Jensen 1982; Near and Jensen 1983; Jos, et al. 1989). Anonymity is likely to lower employees' assessment of the possible personal costs involved in communicating their concerns internally, and increase the perceived effectiveness of the internal procedure (Elliston 1982).

There is some empirical evidence that suggests that anonymity may be an important component of effective internal voice mechanisms. Miceli and Near (1989) found that among government employee whistleblowers, 40 percent reported anonymously. Johnson and Pany (1981) surveyed 45 internal auditors and found that the auditors were more likely to disclose serious activities such as embezzlement, kickbacks, and bribes when they could remain anonymous. Miceli, Roach, and Near (1988) found that government employees who made anonymous internal disclosures were more aware of internal channels and more confident that their identity would not be revealed. It seems logical to conclude that voice mechanisms that allow employees to bypass the chain of command and disclose their concerns anonymously may be relatively more effective in encouraging upward communication concerning ethical and moral issues.

Internal disclosure policies that specify that employees should communicate ethical and moral concerns to their immediate superior or to other superiors within the chain of command may be ineffective, since such requirements may increase the natural reluctance of employees to discuss very sensitive issues. Employees may fear negative consequences, or may wish to avoid the complexity and publicity of a difficult and very public investigative process. In many cases the immediate superior is the subject of employees' concern. Requiring employees to confront their superior will often stifle communication regarding ethical and moral issues.

Based on this discussion, the second research hypothesis is offered:

**Research Hypothesis 2- In companies with internal disclosure policies, the existence of voice mechanisms outside the chain of command that allow employees to remain anonymous will be positively associated with a higher perceived level of communication about ethical and moral issues.**

### **Research Design**

The Society for Human Resource Management provided the names of 1,125 human resources executives, who were then contacted and asked to respond to questions concerning their companies' policies and procedures regarding the communication of ethical and moral concerns by employees. Three hundred (300) responses were received, an overall response rate of approximately 26 percent. Of these, 208 had a formal internal disclosure policy. The results of comparisons between companies with and without formal disclo-

sure policies have been presented elsewhere (Barnett, et al. 1993). Only the 208 companies with formal policies were included in the present study.

Human resources executives were chosen for the survey because of their familiarity with company policies regarding employee disclosures and because their position allows them to accurately assess the level of internal disclosure by employees. Respondents to the survey had spent an average of 10 years with their companies. All the respondents held managerial positions, and about 70 percent had attained the rank of Vice President. Roughly 95 percent of the responding companies had over 500 employees. Two-thirds had more than 1,000, and 19 percent had more than 5,000 employees. Responding companies represented a wide range of industries, including the manufacturing sector (34 percent), the service (28 percent), and the financial (21 percent).

The Society provided demographic information on their entire membership list. The demographic characteristics of the list were compared to the characteristics of the respondents. There were no statistically significant differences between the SHRM membership and the respondents, other than those built into the design of the study (the study targeted upper-level executives in larger organizations). Also, randomly selected non-respondents were telephoned, and information obtained from them was compared to the characteristics of the respondents. This comparison showed no significant differences between respondents and non-respondents.

### **Measures**

Number of available voice mechanisms. Respondents were asked to indicate internal voice mechanisms designated for employees to "communicate their knowledge of activities they perceive to be illegal, immoral, and/or unethical." Voice mechanisms included immediate superiors, other officials within the chain of command, the personnel office, company ombudsmen, ethics committees, anonymous suggestion systems, and anonymous telephone hotlines. An "other" category was also included. If respondents checked the "other" category they were asked to list the additional voice mechanisms available.

Type of voice mechanism. The available voice mechanisms fell into three distinct categories. First, some voice mechanisms required employees to disclose information to the immediate superior and/or to others within the chain of command. These voice mechanisms were combined to form the "Chain of Command Voice Mechanisms" variable.

Other voice mechanisms were outside the chain of command but required employees to identify themselves when making a disclosure. These voice mechanisms were combined to form the "Employee Identified Voice Mechanisms" variable.

Two voice mechanisms were outside the chain of command and allowed employees to remain anonymous. These mechanisms were an anonymous employee suggestion procedure, and an anonymous telephone "hotline." These mechanisms were combined to form the "Anonymous Voice Mechanisms" variable. Each of the three variables was coded "0" if none of the voice mechanisms within that category were present. Each variable was coded "1" if one or more of the voice mechanisms within that category was present.

Management responsiveness. This variable measured the perceived responsiveness of management to employee voice. It was included as a covariate in the present study, be-

cause a previous study indicated its possible association with internal disclosure (Barnett et al. 1993). Responsiveness was measured on a five-point, twelve-item Likert scale. Items on this scale attempted to assess the degree to which management encouraged, supported, and investigated employee concerns. Responses on each item of the scale were summed and scaled to yield "responsiveness scores" ranging from 1 to 5 for each company. Higher scores indicated relatively more responsiveness to employee concerns. The reliability coefficient alpha for the scale was .87.

**Internal disclosures.** The measure of internal disclosures was a five-point scale. Respondents were asked to indicate their perception of the number of employee concerns voiced within the company. Possible responses ranged from "1" = "No Disclosures" to "5" = "Very Many Disclosures."

### **Data Analysis**

Analysis of variance with covariates was used to test the research hypotheses. The perceived level of internal disclosures was the dependent variable. Independent or grouping variables were the three distinct types of voice mechanisms. The covariates were the number of alternative voice mechanisms available and the level of management responsiveness to employee concerns. This research design allowed a comparison of the levels of internal disclosure in companies with and without each of the three types of voice mechanisms, and an assessment of the association between internal disclosures and the overall number of internal voice mechanisms. Data analysis considered both main effects and interaction effects.

### **Results**

Table 1 reports means, standard deviations, and correlations for the variables in this study. The mean number of voice mechanisms available was 2.95. The number of voice mechanisms available ranged from zero in some companies to eight in others.

Table 1: Pearson Correlations, Standard Deviations, and Means (n=208)

Variable	#1	#2	#3	#4	#5	#6
1. Internal Disclosure a	1.00					
2. # of Voice Mechanisms b	.16*	1.00				
3. Management Responsiveness c	.10	.07	1.00			
4. Chain of Command Voice Mechanisms d	.11	.65**	.01	1.00		
5. Employee Identified Voice Mechanisms d	-.06	.23**	.12	-.13	1.00	
6. Anonymous Voice Mechanisms Outside the COC d	.24**	.59**	.09	.13	.18*	
MEAN	2.77	2.95	4.02	- -	- -	- -
STD DEV	.60	1.56	.50			

\* p &lt; .05

\*\* p &lt; .01

a Measured on five-point Likert scale with 1 = "No Disclosures" and 5 = "Very Many Disclosures"

b Number of voice mechanisms ranged from 0 to 8.

c Measured on five-point Likert scale with 1 being relatively unresponsive and 5 being extremely responsive to employee concerns

d Measured as dummy variables with 0 = no voice mechanisms of a particular type and 1 = the presence of one or more voice mechanisms of a particular type

Correlations between the variables of interest were generally in the predicted direction.

One hundred fifty of the 208 respondents reported the existence of voice mechanisms within the chain of command (72 percent). Forty of the companies had voice mechanisms outside the chain of command which required employees to identify themselves (19 percent). Seventy of the companies had voice mechanisms outside the chain of command which provided employees with the opportunity to remain anonymous (34 percent). Most companies had more than one type of voice mechanism available. Twenty-eight



reported no voice mechanisms, which raises a question as to the comprehensiveness of their internal disclosure policy.

### **Tests of Research Hypotheses**

Hypothesis one. The results of the analysis of variance are summarized in table 2. The first hypothesis stated that a higher number of voice mechanisms would be associated with a higher perceived level of communication about ethical and moral issues. Results supported this hypothesis ( $p < .02$ ). The greater the number of voice mechanisms available to employees, the higher was the perceived level of internal disclosures by employees.

**Table 2: Analysis of Variance Results of the Relationship Between Internal Voice Mechanisms and the Perceived Level of Employees' Internal Disclosure**

Source of Variation	Sum of Squares	Degrees of Freedom	F	Significance Level	
Covariates	2.57	2	3.8	.02	
# of VM	1.86	1	5.5	.02	
Mgt. Resp.	.56	1	1.6	.20	Eta
Main Effects	2.83	3	2.8	.04	
COC VM	.16	1	.2	.49	.12
Emp. IDed VM	.53	1	1.6	.21	.05
Anony. VM	1.99	1	5.9	.02	23
Explained	6.25	9	2.1	.04	
Residual	63.72	189			

Multiple  $R^2 = .08$

Multiple  $R = .28$

COC VM = Voice mechanisms within the chain of command

Emp. IDed VM = Voice mechanisms outside the chain of command which require employees to identify themselves

Anony. VM = Voice mechanisms outside the chain of command which allow employees to remain anonymous

Hypothesis two. The second hypothesis stated that anonymous voice mechanisms outside the chain of command would be associated with a higher perceived level of communication about ethical and moral issues. The analysis of variance supported H2 ( $p < .02$ ). When companies provided one or both of the anonymous voice mechanisms, reported levels of internal disclosures were significantly higher.

### Discussion

All the companies considered in this study had developed formal internal disclosure policies of some kind. A previous study using this data base compared the reported level of internal disclosures in the 208 companies with formal policies to the 92 companies with no formal policies and found significantly higher levels of reported internal disclosures in companies with internal disclosure policies (Barnett et al. 1993). The current study reveals that in those companies with formal policies, the number and type of voice mechanisms the policy designates is associated with the level of communication about ethical and moral issues.

Several implications may be drawn from these results. First, results seem to largely confirm that as a form of prosocial behavior, whistleblowing is influenced by organizational actions which sanction internal whistleblowing and remove barriers that inhibit communication about ethical issues. Results also confirm previous conceptual research on whistleblowing that suggests providing a variety of internal voice mechanisms as part of an internal disclosure policy is an effective strategy to increase communication about ethical and moral issues. Companies wishing to generate employee communication concerning such issues in order to identify and correct wrongdoing within the organization may be well advised to provide such mechanisms.

Results also suggest that anonymity may be a key factor that influences the actions of employees when confronted with questionable activities. The anonymous voice mechanisms in this study, anonymous telephone "hotlines" and employee suggestion/complaint boxes, are very uncomplicated and non-threatening to use. The anonymity of these types of disclosures serves as perhaps the most effective deterrent to possible retaliation. Companies who are serious about discovering and correcting wrongdoing within their organizations might consider the establishment of some type of anonymous voice mechanism in addition to other available communication channels.

Although such anonymous voice mechanisms may encourage internal disclosures, they pose a difficult ethical dilemma for the organization. For example, anonymous disclosures could create a climate of suspicion within the organization. Also, anonymous disclosures are usually more difficult to investigate, and therefore the validity of charges is more difficult to determine. Finally, anonymous disclosures may violate standards of justice. Individuals with malicious motives could, behind the protective wall of anonymity, hurl irresponsible charges against innocent people within the organization. Those accused would have little opportunity to confront their accusers (Elliston, 1982). How does the organization achieve its goal of increasing its awareness of legitimate employee concerns, which anonymous voice mechanisms appear to do, and at the same time prevent abuses which may harm the organization and violate fundamental rights of individuals?

While there are no easy answers to this question, several suggestions come to mind. First, the internal disclosure policy should stress that anonymous channels are reserved for relatively serious wrongdoing. Second, the policy should require employees to provide evidence to substantiate their claims, or to at least provide necessary leads to facilitate the investigative process. Finally, the company should strive to create a communication climate that lessens the need for anonymous disclosures.

Results suggest that in the absence of anonymous voice mechanisms, other types of voice mechanisms may be ineffective in generating internal disclosure of sensitive issues. Employees may be inhibited by their fear of retaliation or their reluctance to confront their superior. Employees may perceive that established procedures are not effective, or that they do not have a high degree of procedural or distributive justice. Companies should recognize that if they depend exclusively on channels that require employees to openly identify themselves, they may be stifling employee communication about ethical and moral issues, and that wrongdoing within the organization may go unreported.

There were several limitations inherent in the research design. The study relied exclusively on the perceptions of the human resources executive from each company. These managers should be in a relatively good position to assess the available voice mechanisms and the level of internal disclosures. But, as members of the management team, respondents may have desired to provide socially desirable answers to the inquiries on the survey. Every effort was made to assure respondents of the confidentiality of their responses, thus removing incentives to make their companies appear ideal. And in fact, respondents seemed very candid, sometimes including handwritten elaborations of their answers. More objective measures of internal disclosures are needed, however, and this should be a focal point for future research.

The study was cross-sectional, and therefore no conclusions about causality can be made. Although the present study seems to indicate that the establishment of internal voice mechanisms encourages communication about ethical and moral issues, it is possible that such communication channels are established precisely because the level of employee disclosures is already high. Future research is needed to better explain the possible relationships identified here.

Although correlations among variables were in the predicted direction, relationships did not appear to be very strong. Explained variance was relatively low. Other variables not included in the present analysis certainly affect the level and direction of employee voice. Future studies should concentrate on identifying and testing other possible influences on internal employee disclosures.

In an era of increased concern for employee rights, and increased legal protection for whistleblowers, research into the effect of organizational actions to stimulate internal discussion of ethical and moral issues can provide needed guidance to executives. Researchers should continue efforts to provide this guidance.

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