

## **Identifying Genuine Whistleblowers from Chicken Little in Government Agencies**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Civil servants play important roles in ensuring the effectiveness and efficiency of public administration whilst executing exemplar leadership qualities within the boundaries of ethics, namely, accountability and integrity. Therefore, to have effective and efficient civil servants, other additional ethical aspects of moral and discipline should be emphasised. As a consequence of being proactive to the problem and weaknesses that arise, governmental financial management, administration, ethical cases management, corruption and fraud, and misuse of power which are prohibited by the rules, regulation and religion will be ameliorated. Unethical behaviour needs to be discouraged and to the extent, eradicated. One apparent method of accomplishing this is to encourage individuals to serve as monitors of corporate behaviour and whistle blow on conduct that we know can be highly destructive to the welfare of thousands of individuals. This paper provides preliminary insights meant to identify the genuine whistleblowers rather than chicken little among civil servants in selected government agencies. In order to find the genuine whistleblowers, the perception of civil servants towards whistleblowing itself and the factors that contribute to whistleblowing which are the organisational support and the organisational policy were focused on. Hence, by knowing the perceptions of civil servants and the factors that contribute to whistleblowing, genuine whistleblowers can be identified against the cowardly ones.

### **ARTICLE INFO**

#### *Article history:*

Received: 24 February 2015

Accepted: 21 August 2015

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*Keywords:* Whistleblowing, leadership, civil servants, government agencies, integrity

### **INTRODUCTION**

Civil servants play important roles in ensuring the effectiveness and efficiency of public administration. In order to maximize

their responsibilities, the moral values of civil servants need to be reinforced because they always deal with conflict in the decision making process, and the interest of public (Abdul Noor, 2008). Therefore, to have a very effective and efficient civil servant, the aspects of moral, discipline, integrity and accountability should be emphasised. As a consequence of being proactive to the problems and weaknesses that arise, governmental financial management, administration, ethical cases management, corruption and fraud and misuse of power which are prohibited by the rules, regulation and religion will be ameliorated.

In the moral values and ethical code of conduct among civil servants, the staff are encouraged to develop a good attitude through good moral value because by having good moral values, good attitude can be shaped. Public employees also should be alert on any signs of corruption and have motto and moral philosophy so that they will uphold their moral or ethical principles in carrying out their responsibilities as the civil employees. The code of conduct among civil servants also emphasises on recognition and reward, where any ethical action or conduct should be recognised and rewarded rather than being punished to encourage public employees to act ethically. However, nowadays, it seems that a lot of public civil servant are caught due to misusing of power and breaching of trust such as in the case of corruption and sodomy of Anwar Ibrahim, the former deputy Prime Minister

(1993-1998). Anwar Ibrahim had not been proven guilty as the case was in the trial process; nonetheless as his case is one of the whistleblowing cases in Malaysia, the wrongdoings of political actor was brought forward.

In fact, corruption phenomenon has become serious these days. It is proven when the perception of corrupt practices has risen in recent years. Transparency international Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI) is the survey which has been made as a direct response to citizens' concerns over the state of corruption in this country. In 2009, Malaysia's ranking in the global corruption benchmark Transparency International's Corruption Perception Index (TI-CPI) dropped to 56 from 47 in 2008, demonstrating that the erosion in confidence in our institutions by the public and business community is detrimental to our nation's competitiveness (Economic Planning Unit, 2010).

Unethical behaviour needs to be discouraged, and to the extent possible, eradicated. One apparent method of accomplishing this is to encourage individuals to serve as monitors of corporate behaviour and whistleblow on conduct that we know can be highly destructive to the welfare of thousands of individuals (Reckers-Sauciuc & Lowe, 2010). Sweeney (2008) stated that one-third of deviant cases were discovered through information from whistleblowers and that information from whistleblowers is proven even more effective in revealing fraud than internal or external audits and

control (Nayir & Herzig, 2011). The reporting of incidents or whistleblowing occurs when a member of staff within an organisation discloses that an employee has acted in a way that is a cause for concern, and the person it is reported to has the ability to do something about it (Moore & McAuliffe, 2010). When employees do not blow the whistle, the management may miss opportunities to correct wrongdoing, in which, it is easily hidden from outsiders with legitimate interests, and wrongdoing may worsen (Miceli, Near, Rehg, & Scotter, 2012).

According to the circular of Prime Minister No.1 for 1968, the government came up with the idea of ethical code to emphasise on core values and supportive values, prevention aspect on conflict of interest, whistleblowing aspect, secrecy, skills and knowledge and the principles of accountability. Throughout this code of conduct, Whistleblowing committee in Public service was established.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### *Whistleblowing*

According to Mashera Ambares Khan (2009), there is no exact definition of whistleblowing. Whistleblowing however can be defined as “the disclosure by an organization’s member of illegal, immoral, or illegitimate practices under the control of their employers to person that may able to affect action.”

According to Davis and Konishi (2007), whistleblowing is an ethical basis for the professional responsibility to

expose another’s wrongdoing so that in the context of public sector, it can protect the rights of the public. The whistle should be blown because of one’s duty or responsibility toward the organisation, and not for personal reason.

Whistleblowing is the mechanism of enforcing ethical values and integrity in an organisation (Davis, 2004). There are two types of whistleblowing; internal whistleblowing and external whistleblowing. Internal whistleblowing refers to any reports on misuse of power, corruption, fraud and unethical misconduct done within the organisation where the report is made to the higher authorities in that organisation, whereas external whistleblowing refers to any exposure of wrongdoings, misconduct or mismanagement in an organisation made to entities outside the organisation like media, government authorities or court. External whistleblowing occurs in a few situations, whether it has been informed to the organisational authorities or the disclosure has been done directly to the external entities.

### *Whistle blowers, personal interest or moral obligation?*

However, there are a number of questions arise in whistleblowing, i.e. whether whistleblower can be trusted? What are the intentions of the whistleblower? Does he blow the whistle because of the feeling of loyalty and responsible to the organisation, or is it because of other personal interest? In addition, the roles of whistleblower are

also important as it can prevent problems from getting worst and thus reduce the losses of one organisation as shown in a study by national whistleblower centre in 2007, whereby a whistleblower can save shareholders' billion dollars of money. It is also the mechanism of deterrent off unethical behaviour as the whistleblower willingly.

In Malaysia, section 174(8) of company act 1965 states auditors' obligation to report to the registrar, breaches, or company law. However, there is no protection for whistleblowers. In 2011, the Malaysian government enforced the Whistleblower Protection Act 2010 in order to give protection for whistleblowers and encourage whistleblowing as a way to fight the corruption in the country. In the United States, the congress passed the Civil Service reform act (CSRA) to give protection to those who lodge a report on any misconduct, fraud, or abusing of power in federal agencies (Near & Miceli, 2008). Thus, it can encourage whistleblowers to come forward and report any unethical conducts in their organisation.

In Japan, the law on whistleblowers was established in 2006 to guarantee protection to whistleblowers; however, it comes with a condition that the whistleblowers need to make sure that they have the evidence of a criminal act or any statutory breach before making any disclosure to the authorities or media (Davis & Konishi, 2007). This shows that the issue of whistle-blowing concern the whistleblowers, and how authorities can ensure their safety, and the intentions

of the whistle-blowers, i.e. whether it is done for the organisation or for personal or group interest.

#### *Whistleblower Protection Act 2010*

As a result of the implementation of GTP, the Whistleblower Protection Act 2010 was enforced in 2011, and represented a new piece of legislation protecting the rights and identities of individuals who report instances of corruption. The purpose is to create a secure environment in which potential whistleblowers can act without fear of recrimination. The Whistleblower Protection Act 2010 is a protection mechanism to provide protection to whistleblowers who voluntarily come forward to report or reveal information on corruption activities. The Act, passed by the Parliament in 2010, also serves to encourage the public from all sectors to disclose any corruption related activities (Malaysian Anti-Corruption Commission, 2012). In its fight against corruption, the Fighting Corruption NKRA reported a number of whistleblowers coming forward to report instances of corruption after the Whistleblower Protection Act 2010 that came into force in 2011. The government has, since the implementation of GTP, demonstrated an unprecedented level of transparency and accountability in the execution of its initiatives, and is committed to maintain this level of accountability in the coming years. In fact, citizens are encouraged to be as proactive as possible in voicing their concerns and criticisms

of the GTP, with the promise that every concern will be addressed (Department of Prime Minister, 2012).

#### *Factors of Whistleblowing*

In order to conduct this study, the perception towards whistleblowing and the factors influencing whistleblowing were selected as the variables to find real whistleblowers among the civil servants. Ahmad (2012), in his research, he states that:

*“Research on whistleblowing has largely focused on three general factors: (1) organisational factors, such as organisational ethical, size of organisation, and job level; (2) individual factors such as, ethical judgment, locus of control, and organisational commitment; and (3) situational factors, such as the seriousness of wrongdoing, and the status of wrongdoer. Miceli et al. (2008) in a comprehensive review of whistleblowing literature have suggested that these are the three general factors that influence the behaviour of reporting corporate wrongdoing by employees within organisation.”*

Hence, this study focused on the organisational support and policy as the factors of whistleblowing among civil servants. As for the perception of the civil servant on whistleblowing, this study focused on their mindset and the civil servants’ willingness to whistleblow.

#### **THEORIES**

Theories involved in this study are the Whistleblowing model and Theory of Reasoned Action.

#### *Whistleblowing Model*

Scholars like Greenberger, Gundlach, Douglas, Martinko and Miceli depict whistleblowing as taking place through a number of stages. Henik (2007) provided a summary of these stages. The first stage is marked by a trigger event whereby the observer must decide whether the activity observed is actually wrongful, that is, illegal, immoral or illegitimate. Observers are more likely to consider the activity as wrongful if it conflicts with their own values or those stated by the organisation and if the evidence concerning the activity is unambiguous. In Stage 2, the focal individual supposes the event problematic and engages in a decision-making process about what action to take. This stage includes communication between the individual and co-workers, supervisors, and possibly the wrongdoer (Greenberger et al., 1987; Gundlach et al., 2003), and often a cost-benefit analysis (Miceli et al., 2008). The individual’s action, i.e. whether to blow the whistle or remain silent, occurs in Stage 3. In the fourth stage, the accused organisation reacts to the report. Finally, in Stage 5, the whistle-blower assesses the organisation’s response and considers whether further action is warranted (Richardson, Wang, & Hall, 2012; Near & Miceli, 2013).

#### *Theory of Reasoned Action*

A number of studies have cited severity of the wrongdoing as significantly related to decisions to report unethical behaviour (Richardson et al., 2012). As cited by

Richardson *et al.* (2012), Ajzen & Fishbein (2012), the Theory of Reasoned Action proposes that behavioural intent is the most significant predictor of human behaviour which is formulated in a rational manner as the function of two factors: (a) one's personal attitude toward the behavior and (b) subjective norms. An individual's personal attitude toward a behaviour includes whether he or she perceives a specific behaviour as favourable or unfavourable (Kaptein, 2010). Moreover, one's attitude is influenced by his behavioural beliefs, or the probability that a particular behaviour will lead to particular outcomes, and evaluation of outcomes, an assessment of whether engaging in the behaviour will lead to positive or negative outcomes (Richardson *et al.*, 2012). Meanwhile, subjective norms explain how an individual believes relevant others will perceive the behaviour if performed by the individual. These are comprised of normative beliefs, individuals' perceptions of what relevant others think about them performing the behaviour and motivations to comply, and individuals' inclination to behave in a similar manner as their reference group (Richardson *et al.*, 2012). The Theory of Reasoned Action is recognised for its potential to identify particular targets of persuasion that can, in turn, influence a specific, wilful behaviour (Near & Miceli, 2013). Hence, the Theory of Reasoned Action is appropriate for examining the whistleblowing decision-making process (Richardson *et al.*, 2012).

In light of whistleblowing models, the Theory of Reasoned Action seems to be an especially suitable fit for examining whistle-blowing intentions. Many of the scholarly whistleblowing models directly or indirectly highlight interactions between the focal individual and relevant others, including co-workers, supervisors, and even the wrongdoer (Greenberger *et al.*, 1987; Gundlach *et al.*, 2003; Miceli *et al.*, 2008). Such interactions parallel TRA's focus on individuals' considerations of significant others' opinions about performing a particular behaviour. Individuals considering whether to blow the whistle do not make their decisions in a vacuum, whereby they talk to others who help the focal individuals make sense of the situation and weigh the impacts of blowing the whistle (Richardson *et al.*, 2012). Another factor that cuts across many whistle-blowing models is the cost-benefit analysis; a process by which potential whistleblowers assess the expected advantages of whistleblowing (Richardson *et al.*, 2012). This cost-benefit analysis relates closely to the theory's notions of behavioural beliefs and evaluation of outcomes. In this process, the individual weighs the positive and negative outcomes of engaging in a particular behaviour (Richardson *et al.*, 2012). Finally, the general purpose of the Theory of Reasoned Action is to explain an individual's conscious decisions rather than those that are impulsive or spontaneous (Loyens, 2012). Similarly, whistleblowing is traditionally conceptualised as a process

built upon deliberation, reflection and careful consideration (Near & Miceli, 2013). For these reasons, the Theory of Reasoned Action is expected to provide a sound, theoretical model for predicting whistleblowing behaviour.

### CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

To conclude the concepts and presented theories, a conceptual framework for this study is proposed and summarised, as follows:

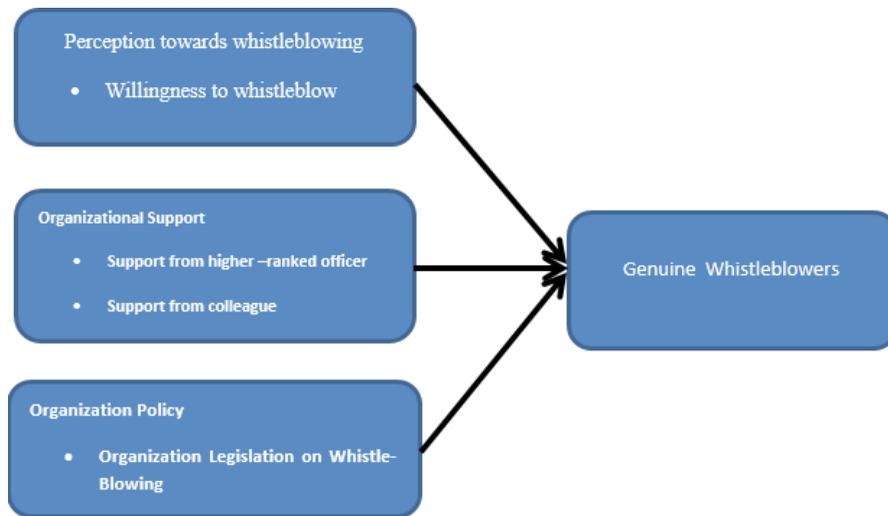


Fig.1: Conceptual Framework

Fig.1 shows the proposed conceptual framework of the study. From the framework, the independent variables are the perception towards whistleblowing, organisational support and the organisation's policy. Meanwhile, the dependent variable is the genuine whistleblowers.

For the independent variables, they were constructed according to the Theory of Reasoned Action. As for the first independent variable, which is the perception towards whistleblowing is derived from the first factor of the theory; the one's personal attitude towards the behaviour. It is about the perception

of an individual, i.e. the way he or she perceives whistleblowing as favourable or unfavourable. As a result, this attitude will lead to an outcome such as their willingness to whistleblow.

The second and third independent variables are derived from the second factor of the Theory of Reasoned Action, which is the subjective norm. The subjective norm is what individual perceives of what others think of his or her attitudes and also the motivation for the individual to comply with his or her behaviour. This study focused on the motivation for the individuals to whistleblow. These are organisational

support, which include the support from the higher ranked officer and also the support from the colleagues, i.e. whether or not they support the act of whistleblowing. Another independent variable is the organisational policy, i.e. whether the organisation has any legislation on whistleblowing or not. These two independent variables will determine the motivation of an individual to be or not to be a whistleblower.

Hence, by studying the three independent variables, the expected outcome is that the researcher could identify a genuine whistleblower, which is the dependent variable for the study.

## CONCLUSION

As a conclusion, the role of whistleblowing especially in the government or public sector should be emphasised more because the public or government agencies are responsible in catering for the public welfare and it is important to gain the public trust as a whole. Since whistleblowing is one of the ways to combat corruption and wrongdoings within an organisation, it is therefore crucial to improve and increase the number of whistleblowers. Therefore, determining the perception and also the factors that contribute to whistleblowing can help the responsible ones to put more efforts in encouraging whistleblowing.

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