Whistleblowing Intention in Sport: An Investigation into Perceptions, Antecedent Conditions, and Cost-Benefit Analysis

Andrew Goldsmith, Coastal Carolina University
Matthew Walker, Texas A&M University

Abstract 2016-320
Saturday, June 4, 2016
20-minute oral presentation (including questions)
(Forum West 2)

Abstract

The impact of ethical wrongdoing on society, and its ramifications, has pervaded multiple segments of everyday life (Near & Miceli, 1995). From Edward Snowden leaking classified National Security Agency (NSA) documents, to General Motors falsifying safety information, to the Penn State University sexual assault scandal, organizational wrongdoings have permeated sport, general business, and governmental organizations. The dissemination of these wrongdoings is referred to as whistleblowing, which is “… the disclosure by organization members (former and current) of illegal, immoral, or illegitimate practices under the control of their employers, to persons or organizations that may be able to affect action” (Near & Miceli, 1985, 525). The emphasis of motivations for whistleblowing is typically limited to the whistleblower trying to right an ethical wrongdoing. However, whistleblowing may also be an individual's attempt to see change in policy or practice (Near & Jensen, 1983).

Sport has seen an increase in high-profile whistleblowing cases over the last fifteen years (e.g., match fixing, bribery, corruption, doping, performance-enhancing drugs, discrimination, academic fraud, sexual abuse, physical abuse, and misuse of trade secrets). Despite sport offering unique and relevant cases from which to study whistleblowing, there are only a handful of research articles using sport as the context for whistleblowing behavior. To the researcher's knowledge, this study is the first attempt at creating a sport-centric whistleblowing model to understand the antecedents and moderating variables (i.e., benefit-to-cost differentials) towards whistleblowing intention, while also providing a retrospective content analysis on sport whistleblowing cases over the last fifteen years.

Literature Review

The prevalence of whistleblowing can be seen in organizations worldwide as deciers of big business have become more aware of unethical behavior and general wrongdoing within their organizations (Richardson & McGlynn, 2011). The increase in social awareness of ethical wrongdoings or illegal actions has risen considerably since the 1970s, when (at that time) there was fear that the cost of disseminating negative information outweighed any ethical consideration of righting a wrong (Keil, Tiwana, & Sneha, 2010). In the 1980s, however, whistleblowing as a prosocial practice became more accepted since statutes began appearing that protected the whistleblower from litigious recourse (Keil et al., 2010). Still, the antecedent conditions of whistleblowing are impacted by numerous barriers, concerns, and risks to the whistleblower, that collectively minimize or enhance the likelihood of a whistleblowing intention (Near & Miceli, 1995). Near and Miceli (1995) elucidated the social stigmas surrounding whistleblowing, which center on power, credibility, retaliation, organizational climate, and anonymity. Keil et al. (2010) explained the “mum-effect,” or the reluctance to disseminate bad news, while Seifert (2006) couched whistleblowing in the idea of social justice. Key constructs of whistleblowing in a business management setting are well-defined and somewhat consistent among researchers. However, the body of research on whistleblowing has not sufficiently explained intentions beyond the motive of prosocial behavior. Moreover, prior whistleblowing research has not adequately extended beyond description to explanation of the antecedents that lead to one’s intention to blow the whistle. Additionally, few studies have offered empirical evidence to support the various antecedent conditions of the whistleblowing process proposed by researchers.

Research Questions

Influenced by the lack of research on whistleblowing in sport, the purpose of this study is to develop a unified model for whistleblowing intention with attention paid to the antecedent conditions, benefit-to-cost differential, affiliation, severity of rules violations, and moral and ethical considerations. The main thesis is that these antecedent conditions for whistleblowing in sport are somewhat different from mainstream business, thereby warranting further investigation into this context. The outcome of this research should enhance sport management scholar’s theoretical
and practical considerations of the phenomenon. The following overarching research questions were developed to guide this investigation:

1. What is the perception of whistleblowing in sport?
2. What are the antecedent conditions that influence whistleblowing intention in sport?
3. What are potential benefit-to-cost differential considerations that influence whistleblowing intention?
4. How does one’s affiliation with an organization influence intention to whistleblow?

Method

In order to meet the goal of replicating findings across cases, a multiple-case study design was used (Yin, 2003). This allowed the researcher to draw comparisons between cases by exploring the differences within and between cases (Yin, 2003). The context of whistleblowing in sport has yet to be researched in any great depth. This qualitative inquiry was juxtaposed against a conceptual model and a set of propositions that aimed to answer a set of research questions (e.g., “how” and “why”) in a sport setting, which allowed for criteria to be interpreted. Thus, this research method satisfied Baxter and Jack’s (2004) criteria for a rigorous case study. Moreover, examining whistleblowing via a sport context using a “blank slate” mindset allowed for unique findings (Merriam, 2009). Baxter and Jack (2004) suggested that a case study, “... supports the deconstruction and the subsequent reconstruction of various phenomena” (p. 544). Hence, this comprehensive qualitative approach was deemed an appropriate method as it strives for exploration, pursues intellectual interest in a phenomenon, and has as its goal the extension of knowledge (Merriam, 2009). To select the most appropriate sample, a purposive stratified approach was used, where key informants were drawn from a cross-section of collegiate levels (Division I – FBS, Division I – FCS, and Division II). The sampling technique allowed the researcher to select a smaller number of rich cases to gain a deeper understanding of whistleblowing. The selection of respondents encompassed Athletic Directors, Associate Athletic Directors, Directors of Compliance, Assistant Compliance Directors, and Faculty Athletic Representatives. This process continued until an adequate representation (and strata) of individuals and universities had been achieved.

Results

Findings established possible antecedents and cost-benefit analysis barriers. Respondents identified five major themes as potential whistleblowing antecedent conditions that influence whistleblowing intention. Altruism and prosocial behavior serve as positive, ethical antecedent conditions for whistleblowing behavior using intentional and voluntary ethics to determine the degree of rightness in decision-making. However, not every motive to whistleblow is prosocial in nature. It is extremely difficult to always be morally and ethically sound, and to do the right thing, because there are other factors or situational factors to consider. This allows for revenge, competitive advantage, and personal advancement to serve as potential negative whistleblowing antecedent conditions. The aforementioned antecedent conditions (altruism, prosocial behavior, revenge, competitive advantage, and personal advancement) act as the expected benefits in a cost-benefit analysis leading to whistleblowing intention. Three themes (e.g., loyalty, social-situational, and employments factors) and multiple subthemes (e.g., family, perception, job security, affiliation, etc.) emerged as the perceived costs (e.g., barriers) dissuading whistleblowing behavior. Additionally, there was consensus amongst respondents who considered whistleblowing to be a moral and ethical act, though some mentioned being desensitized to the magnitude and severity of the rules violations or illegal behavior that is reported. The results of this research have bolstered sport-specific theory on ethical decision-making while also contributing to our understanding of the whistleblowing phenomenon in sport.