

A SURVEY OF WHISTLEBLOWERS:
THEIR STRESSOR AND COPING STRATEGIES

by

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Whistleblowing is a complex phenomenon that appears to be occurring with greater frequency. While much has been reported about individual whistleblower cases, we sought to identify common experiences or common characteristics of whistleblowers in an effort to assist those who work with and on behalf of whistleblowers.

Many persons have helped to make this project successful. Our sincere thanks to those who helped us to gather names and addresses of whistleblowers, those who reviewed the questionnaire for completeness and clarity, Louis Clark for his encouragement, Cathy Haynes for typing the several versions of the survey form, and our daughter Beth for assistance in collating and mailing and data encoding. Most importantly we thank those whistleblowers who took time to participate in the survey by sharing so much of themselves with us. We know that for many reliving their experiences was quite painful. Many also provided us with supporting documents and information; some thanked us for "caring enough to ask" for the information. To all of, you are to be commended and rewarded for your activity!

Contained in this document is a summary of our research findings. We hope that it will lead to further understanding of the whistleblowing experience.

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In an effort to understand the commonalities of the whistleblowing experience, questionnaires with cover letter and return postage were mailed to a sample of 233 whistleblowers in the Spring of 1986. Of that number, 15 were returned due to incorrect addresses, 2 declined to participate because of pending litigation, and 87 questionnaires were completed and returned. Three, however, were received too late to be included in the data analysis although the open-ended responses to items were included. The response rate, then, was 40%.

The available sample represented individuals identified as whistleblowers in private industry and government. Names were gathered from a variety of sources, primarily whistleblower support groups and other whistleblowers. In the absence of any type of roster from which to sample, this nonprobability sampling method was used. Although the results of this survey come from a convenience sample, we do believe that the sample is representative of known whistleblowers.

Those responding to the survey ranged in age from 28-72 years with a mean age of 47 years (SD , 10.3). Almost two-thirds (73%) were male. Twenty-five (30%) had been employed in the private sector with 57 (68%) employed by the government (49 Federal, 8 city or state). The respondents did not indicate whether they had been in the public or private sector. At the time of the whistleblowing, 44% were in professional positions and 24% held

managerial positions. Included in the sample were those in positions/ professions such as attorney, physician, nurse, engineer, electrician, secretary, truck driver, financial officer, and librarian. Ten respondents (12%) were in the military at the time of blowing the whistle.

For most (63%) the whistleblowing episode reported occurred after 1980. Overall, at the time of the whistleblowing, respondents tended to be between 39 and 43 years of age. Those in private industry, however, tended to be younger (33-40 years) as compared to those in government (40-45 years). They had been employed at the firm/agency for an average of 6.7 years prior to the whistleblowing. Almost three fourths (74%) had been there 10 years or less and one-third (32%) had been there two years or less. It appears that whistleblowing tends to occur when the employee has been at a firm/agency between 5 and 8 years.

Over half reported exposing abuse (54%) followed by fraud (47%), waste (44%), corruption (41%), safety (16%), and other (5%). activities exposed varied and included violation of federal law, misuse of public funds, falsifying of documents, mismanagement, misuse of Federal facilities, questionable research activities, excessive spending, and censorship. They dealt with legal, technological, and personnel matters as well as environmental and safety issues. When asked to attach a dollar amount to the waste, fraud, or abuse exposed 36 respondents did so with 25 of the 36 indicating the amount exceeded \$1 million.

How Did They Blow the Whistle?

Over half (57%) reported blowing the whistle in person. The remainder used the telephone (22%) or mail (22%). Only 21% of the sample took their action anonymously. (note: Because these individuals are in the sample, one can assume that at some point in the process the anonymity was broken. Those who managed to remain anonymous are not in the sample and represented by these results, of course.) Table 1 indicates to whom respondents first blew the

Table 1. To Whom the Waste, Fraud, Abuse or Corruption Was First Reported

<u>To Whom</u>	<u>Number</u>	<u>Percent</u>
Immediate supervisor	30	36.6
Head of firm/agency	14	17.1
Newspaper/Radio/Press	11	13.4
Hot Line	6	7.3
Congressional Representative	4	4.9
Government Accountability Project	1	1.2
Other	16	19.5

whistle. It is interesting to note that over half (54%) approached someone within the firm/agency rather than going to the media or to Congress. Included in the "other" category are the Inspector General, EEO officer, Attorney General, Nuclear Regulatory Commission or Secretary of State, all of whom could be considered internal routes as well. These results are counter to those

individuals who speculate that the whistleblower is motivated by a desire for publicity, although the specific route varied, the choice of an internal versus external route as a strategy for whistleblowing was the same for private and public sectors. Further, it did not vary based on age or gender of the whistleblower.

For 80.5% of the sample, the initial action was considered unsuccessful and they subsequently used other avenues, primarily external routes. Most frequently whistleblowers turned to a congressional representative (20%), the press (12%), the next level supervisor (12%), or an attorney (12%). Others mentioned the Government Accountability Project, Office of Special Counsel, Civil Service Commission, OSHA, the union, or "everyone I could think of." It's important to note that those who choose to 'go public' in whistleblowing have already tried working within the system and have found their efforts to be unsuccessful for the most part.

Retaliation Experienced by Whistleblowers

All but one respondent reported experiencing retaliation which they attributed to their whistleblowing. That one individual merely indicated that "nothing could be proved." For the rest, however, retaliation occurred in several forms (Table 2) with those who had been employed longer experiencing more retaliation ($r = -.19$). Generally the retaliation can be categorized as harassment or job-related. For example, harassment came from superiors (82.1%) as well as from peers (53.6%) and included verbal

Table 2. Retaliation Experienced by Whistleblowers.

<u>Retaliation</u>	<u>Number</u>	<u>Percent</u>
Harassment from superiors	69	82.1
Monitoring of activities	58	69.0
Removal of job responsibilities	53	63.1
Loss of job	50	59.5
Harassment from peers	45	53.6
Change in type of position	37	44.0
Monitoring of office telephone	32	8.1
Demotion	26	1.0
Legal action	23	27.4
Psychiatric or medical referral	22	26.2
Decrease in salary	14	16.7
Forced retirement	12	14.3
Sexual harassment	11	13.1

harassment and abuse, telephone and activity monitoring, denial of sick leave request, or being ignored. Job-related retaliation included demotion, firing, and forced retirement. Some harassment differed between those in private industry and those in government. Whistleblowers in private industry were more likely to loose their jobs (84% private versus 49% government) while those in government were more likely to have job responsibilities removed (75% versus 40%), office telephone monitored (47% versus 16%), forced retirement (19% versus 0%), or sexual harassment (18% versus 4%).

Retaliation did not differ between males and females, nor did the extent of retaliation appear to be related to the age of the whistleblower. Younger employees, however, and those employed a shorter time prior to whistleblowing tended to experience loss of job and monitoring of activities.

Resources Used by the Whistleblower

A variety of resources were used by whistleblowers to help them to cope with the results of their activity (Table 3). Most

Table 3. Resources Used by Whistleblowers

<u>Resource</u>	<u>Percent Used</u>	<u>Helpfulness Rating</u>
Legal advice	90.5	2.3
Contact with other whistleblowers	79.8	2.4
Government Accountability Project	60.7	2.5
Psychological Counseling	57.1	2.0
Medical Consultation	47.6	1.6
merit System Protection Board	45.2	0.6
Office of Special Counsel (OSC)	4.9	0.8
Project on Military Procurement	13.1	1.2

Note: 0 = Not at all and 5 = very Helpful

sought legal advice and 63.1% indicated legal action of some sort while 20.2 had legal action brought against them. Contact with other whistleblowers, the Government Accountability Project (GAP), and psychological counseling were other resources used by over half of the respondents. These same resources were rated to be the most helpful although it should be noted that they were still only moderate helpful according to respondents. (Note: Some of these resources are available only for Federal employees.)

Effects of the Whistleblowing Episode

The events surrounding the whistleblowing episode were considered very stressful for the whistleblower (mean rating 8.0 where 9 = Extremely Stressful) who felt only a moderate degree of control over what was happening. Whistleblowers considered

themselves to be in good physical and mental health prior to whistleblowing and as a result of the stress experienced both physical and mental health were reported to have deteriorated to the "modest" level. It would appear that the length of time involved in resolving the events surrounding the whistleblowing was a factor. For 37%, resolution took an average of 3 years; for the remaining 63%, resolution has not yet occurred despite the 5 years that have passed since the actual whistleblowing.

The results and stressfulness of the whistleblowing not only affected the individual, but understandably affected the spouse and, to a lesser extent, the children also (Table 4). The most

Table 4. Overall Effects of Whistleblowing on Self, Spouse, and Children

	<u>Effect</u>	<u>Self</u>	<u>Spouse</u>	<u>Children</u>
Physical Health	+	4.8*	5.1	5.9
	None	15.7	32.2	45.1
	-	79.6	62.7	49.0
Emotional State	+	8.4	5.1	2.0
	None	6.0	9.5	29.4
	-	85.5	85.4	68.6
Social Activities	+	6.0	3.4	5.9
	None	22.9	37.1	45.1
	-	71.1	69.5	49.0
Spiritual Well-Being	+	37.8	18.6	5.9
	None	17.1	33.9	52.9
	-	45.1	47.5	41.2

*Percent reporting

negative effect was on the emotional state followed by social

activities and physical health. Even spiritual well-being was perceived as being somewhat negatively affected. (Note: Seventy percent of the whistleblowers were married at the time and 61% had children.)

Table 5 provides a listing of what the whistleblower and spouse are reported to have experienced. Feelings of powerlessness, anxiety, anger, isolation, and depression were accompanied by changes in sleep, eating, and exercise patterns for both. Financial concerns resulting from loss of job.

Table 5. Symptoms Reported by the Whistleblower for Self and Spouse

<u>Symptom</u>	<u>Spouse (n=59)</u>	<u>Self (n=84)</u>
Increased alcohol use	13.6	26.5
Increased drug use	10.3	18.1
Increased smoking	20.3	24.1
Lack of exercise	28.8	54.2
Weight loss	8.5	28.9
Weight increase	33.9	37.3
Loss of sleep	50.8	77.1
Increased sleep	3.4	13.3
Feelings of panic	25.4	50.6
Sense of powerlessness	33.9	81.9
Loss of financial credit	20.3	44.6
Increased anxiety	69.5	80.7
Increased anger	54.2	79.5
Attempted suicide	1.7	9.6
Psychosomatic illness	6.8	22.9
Withdrawal	16.9	45.8
Paranoia	15.3	34.9
Depression	35.6	73.5
Feelings of isolation	30.5	73.5
Feelings of being misunderstood	22.0	71.1
Loss of financial independence	26.7	54.2

or forced retirement were common also. For some, the whistleblowing led to loss of home (17%) or bankruptcy (8%) and 15% view divorce to be a result. Almost 10% reported they had attempted suicide with others indicating they had considered it.

Interestingly, those who experienced harassment from their peers for being a whistleblower reported significantly more stress connected with the episode. It would appear that a support network within the work environment is critical to minimizing the stress. Whether or not the whistleblower attempted to be anonymous was another factor related to the stressfulness. Those who attempted to be anonymous reported a higher level of stress, consistent with the increased extent of retaliation they experienced. This finding would suggest that a mechanism for whistleblowing be developed that would protect the anonymity of those who desire it. Anonymity would serve also to decrease or eliminate the harassment from peers associated with the increased stress.

When asked to list the three most negative outcomes of their whistleblowing, the financial burden and/or loss of job topped the list (54%). Cited second most often was the emotional strain on self (21%) or family (19%), along with the ridicule from others (17%). Loss of promotion or career change was listed by 17%. Included in this latter group are a number of whistleblowers from the nuclear power industry who indicated they were blackballed from the industry as retaliation. Some mentioned having lost faith in other (7%), the government (6%), or the judicial system (5%). Two even reported having action taken against their lives.

Ways of Coping

Coping consists of cognitive and behavioral efforts to overcome, reduce, or tolerate the internal and environmental demands in stressful situations. The revised Ways of Coping scale was used to determine the strategies whistleblowers used to cope. The items measure problem-focused coping and emotion-focused coping. Problem-focused coping refers to efforts to deal with the source of stress by changing one's own behavior and/or by changing environmental conditions. Emotion-focused coping refers to efforts to reduce or tolerate emotional distress.

In general, adults tend to use relatively more problem-focused coping in work situations and those situations they believe they can change and to use more emotion-focused coping in health situations and ones they appraise they must accept. Coping flexibility involves using a variety of coping strategies over time with confrontive, denial, and escape/avoidance techniques generally leading to poor outcomes if used excessively.

Among this sample of whistleblowers, problem-focused and emotion-focused strategies were used in approximately equal amounts, suggesting flexibility. Although they tended to confront the situation rather than distance themselves from it, they also used positive reappraisal and exercise of self-control. The strategy used relatively most frequently was to seek social support.

The length of time employed at the firm/agency prior to whistleblowing was not associated with coping although age was.

Younger workers tended to be more likely to accept responsibility, attempt to distance themselves, and use escape/avoidance strategies.

What Motivates the Whistleblower

A number of personality and environmental factors undoubtedly interact to motivate the whistleblower to action. Specifically measured in this survey was the ethical ideology. The Ethics Position Questionnaire measures approaches to moral judgment using two factors. The first is the extent to which an individual rejects universal moral rules in favor of relativism. The second dimension is the degree of idealism. Based on these two factors, individuals are categorized as adopting one of four approaches to making ethical judgments: situationism, absolutism, subjectivism, and exceptionism. Whistleblowers surveyed tended to be in two of the four groups (Table 6). Generally, those

Table 6. Ethical Ideologies of respondents

Idealism	Relativism	
	High	Low
High	Situationists 10.8%	Absolutists 45.9%
Low	Subjectivists 9.5%	Exceptionists 33.8%

responding believe moral codes are universal rather than relative. For the absolutists, acts are judged as moral through comparison to

the universal moral rule. . They believe that the best possible outcome can always be achieved by following universal moral rules. Exceptionists, however, believe that absolute moral principles are important but the rules must be applied in a way that produces the greatest good for the greatest number. As might be expected, situationists tended to be the younger whistleblowers.

Would They Blow the Whistle Again?

In spite of the retaliation experienced and the stress which resulted, when queried as to how likely they would be to blow the whistle again, only 16% responded "not at all" as compared to 54% who responded "extremely likely." the remainder were evenly divided between being like and unlikely. The likelihood was somewhat less for those who experienced harassment from peers, legal action, and change in the type of employment position. Increased likelihood was related also to the increased use of problem-focused coping strategies. Furthermore, likelihood was unrelated to factors such as ethical ideology, age, length of time employed, how stressful the situation was perceived to be, or whether the individual was in the private sector.

One factor which was associated with the likelihood of blowing the whistle again was telephone monitoring with a record kept of all numbers called. Respondents indicated they would be significantly less likely to blow the whistle under these conditions and perceived it very likely that the information from monitoring would be used against them. In this increasingly

technological environment, such monitoring could impact on whistleblowing in the future.

Positive Results of Whistleblowing

Did anything positive occur as a result of the whistleblowing? Only 20% indicated that changes were made as a result of their activity. Many of the 20% cited personnel changes: complete management change, personnel practices corrected, persons transferred or replaced or not reappointed, department restructured. Others cited changes in policy, indictments, improved safety, or official investigations by the FBI or NRC. Almost all respondents mentioned a positive outcome from the experience for them personally, however, mentioned by 34% was an increased sense of self-respect or self-worth for having done what was right. Almost an equal number (32%) mentioned having made the workplace healthier or safer or having saved the taxpayers money. For some the event provided an opportunity to make new friends (11%), grow in the spiritual dimension (11%), further define their values (8%), or increase their commitment to family (5%). Several (11%), mentioned a career change or getting out of the government as a positive outcome.

Advice to Potential Whistleblowers

Don't do it! That advice was offered by almost a third (29%) of the respondents. They also warned to expect retaliation, financial loss, and mental anguish (45%). That advice must be tempered, though by advice to listen to your conscience (20%), document everything (31%), get support from other whistleblowers

(14%), know your legal rights (14%), plan your actions carefully (12%), and do it anonymously or get someone else to do it for you (13%). Those in the survey seem to be telling others to be aware of the consequences and then do what is right for them, availing themselves of whatever support systems are available.

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