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The Implications of an Organization's Structure on Whistleblowing

Granville King, III

ABSTRACT. Previous studies investigating reports of corporate or individual wrongdoing have failed to examine the effects of an organization's structure upon the decision to blow the whistle. This paper suggests that an organization's structure may perform a significant role in the decision to report versus not report an observed wrongdoing. Five organizational structures (that is, centralized, matrix, horizontal, hybrid, and divisional) were examined in regards to their effectiveness in encouraging or discouraging observers of unethical conduct channels for reporting such behavior. Discussion and implications are provided.

Researchers who study whistleblowing (e.g., Miceli and Near, 1992; Barnett, Cochran and Taylor, 1993; Barnett, 1992; Stewart, 1990) have emphasized the significance of clear and proper channels for reporting illegal and unethical behavior within an organization. Current research (King, 1994) suggests, however, that whistleblowing may also be influenced by an organization's structure, a finding not indicated in previous studies.

Various scholars (e.g., Miceli and Near, 1992; King, 1994) have examined variables which may influence the decision to blow the whistle, but have failed to focus upon the configurational aspects of an organization's structure as a key component. This article expands the literature on whistleblowing by examining how an organiza-

tion's structure may influence the decision to disclose a wrongdoing. This paper will explore two propositions:

- P₁ Whistleblowers use of internal disclosure channels may be affected by the structure of an organization.
- P₂ Attributes of various organizational structures may influence internal disclosure of perceived wrongdoings.

Whistleblowing defined

Whistleblowing has been defined as "the disclosure by organization members (former or current) 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, p. 4). Although this statement has been widely accepted, researchers have indicated problems with this definition. Farrell and Petersen (1982), for instance, perceive whistleblowing as occurring only when information is leaked to parties outside the organization. That is, whistleblowing can only occur when parties external to the organization are informed of illegal or unlawful wrongdoing within an organization. These individuals may be members of the media, government officials, members of public support groups, or various other parties external to the organization who can bring about change.

Near and Miceli's (1985) definition of whistleblowing, however, describes it as taking place when a person reports individual or corporate wrongdoing to sources either internal or external

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to the organization. Internal whistleblowing may be defined as disclosure to sources within the organization (for example, members of upper management and supervisors) who can bring about effective change regarding a perceived wrongdoing. Reports of wrongdoing to coworkers (peer reporting), however, would not be considered whistleblowing. On the other hand, in circumstances where the wrongdoer is a higher official, the observer of the wrongdoing could report the incident to other members of upper management (whistleblowing) who could eliminate the unlawful act. This type of action may be accompanied by the exiting of the wrongdoer and/or dissenter (Miceli and Near, 1992).

Whistleblowing is a sensitive style of communication which requires the successful communicator to consider the audience, purpose, language, and tone of the wrongdoing that is being disclosed. There are a couple of benefits to internal whistleblowing as opposed to external disclosure. For example, "Internal disclosures allow organizations a chance to fix problems before they develop into full-blown scandals" (Barnett, 1992, p. 950). Furthermore, internal disclosure creates an ethical atmosphere within the organization where employees are encouraged to report unethical behavior (Barnett, 1993). If, however, the organization's climate is conducive to suppressing internal disclosure, the wrongdoing may go unreported for months causing the organization to suffer.

Although internal and external whistleblowing appear to be different, they are conceptually similar. For instance, both forms of whistleblowing start with individuals observing organizational wrongdoings committed by executives/managers or employees. Furthermore, both use the active voice (that is, verbal communication) as a means of eliminating the wrongdoing, instead of alternative approaches, such as sabotage or violence. Finally, both forms of whistleblowing may threaten organizational norms and culture, creating an atmosphere of animosity and retaliation against the observer of the wrongdoing (Miceli and Near, 1992).

Structure

Theorists have defined organizational structure in various ways. Organ and Bateman (1986), for example, define structure as "the formal, systematic arrangement of the operations and activities that constitute an organization and the interrelationships of these operations to one another" (p. 607). Griffin and Moorhead (1986) perceive structure as including the organization's tasks, reporting, and various relationships within the organization. Daft (1989) defines structure as consisting of formal reporting relationships, including the number of levels in the hierarchy, the span of control of managers and supervisors, and the communication within the organization across departments.

Although these definitions appear similar, Daft's (1989) explanation of organizational structure is more comprehensive than the other theorists. Daft (1989), for example, believes communication performs a significant role in the structure of an organization. Companies which modify their existing structure may hamper or restrict communication lines within the organization. From a whistleblowing perspective, observers of corporate or individual wrongdoing may fail to report unethical behavior due to barriers in communication channels within the organization.

Dalton, Todor, Spendolini, Fielding, and Porter (1980) have examined organizational structure and employee behavior. Dalton et al. (1980) found that an organization's structure may influence the behavior of an employee. That is, the configuration (span of control), number of hierarchies, subordinate ratio, and numerous other variables may affect an individual's behavior within an organization.

Individual whistleblowing may also be linked to an organization's structure. For example, Miceli and Near (1992) indicated that the size of an organization may affect responses to perceived wrongdoing. Whistleblowing is more likely to occur in smaller organizations. Large organizations are less dependent on any one individual, allowing for job assignments to be given to other employees within the organization. Thus, employees within large organizations

may perceive themselves as less influential or able to bring about change in a wrongdoing (Miceli and Near, 1992). Along those same lines, whistleblowing is less open and frequent in hierarchical, bureaucratic, or authoritarian organizations. Organizations whose communication methods are top-down are more likely to suppress views expressed by employees that differ from those of upper management (Miceli and Near, 1992).

The traditional centralized (vertical) organizational structure closely parallels a bureaucratic top-down pattern. The centralized organizational structure is characteristic of the classical style of management based upon the works of Fayol, Weber and Taylor (Andrews and Herschel, 1996). That is, all decisions are transmitted in a top-down pattern to employees and staff throughout the organization. The centralized organizational structure may be characterized as providing "high levels of management control, standardized procedures, uniform policies, specific titles, ranked positions, a high level of bureaucracy, and highly structured organizational communication" (Andrews and Herschel, 1996, p. 139). Furthermore, within a centralized organizational structure, management controls personnel, policies, practices, and individual tasks allowing for greater efficiency within the organization (Andrews and Herschel, 1996). Figure 1 provides an illustration of the flow of communication within a centralized (vertical) structure.

As previously mentioned, a bureaucratic organization may be less open to individual opposition by employees within an organization. According to Miceli and Near (1992), "Whistleblowing represents a form of organizational dissent and frequently, deviations from majority views" (p. 157). Within a bureaucratic or centralized structure, top management may feel threatened or challenged by individuals who dislike an established policy or action within the organization.

Furthermore, within a centralized structure, whistleblowers are more likely to report wrongdoing externally (versus internally) to the organization. A few reasons could account for this response: First, reports made within a bureaucratic (centralized) structure are more likely to be

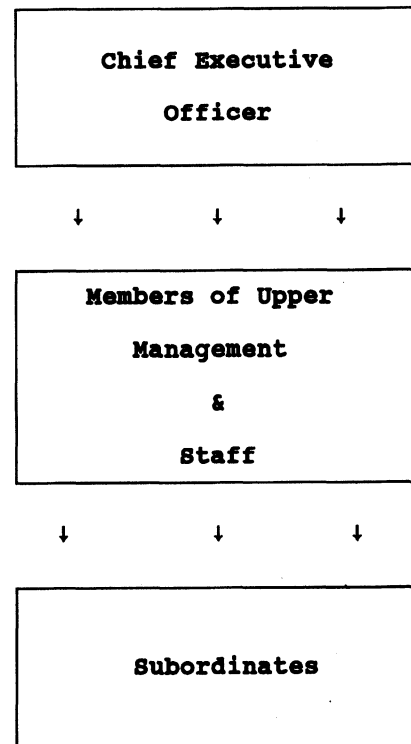


Figure 1. Traditional centralized (vertical) organizational structure.

ignored by members of upper management (Miceli, Near and Schwenk, 1991). Second, the climate within the organization is likely to be threatening (retaliatory) to any opposition to established rules or procedures by members of upper management. Finally, although there are various channels that can facilitate communication (for example, telephone, face-to-face), the channel most often used within a centralized structure is written.

- P₃ Whistleblowers may be less likely to use internal disclosure channels within a vertical (bureaucratic, top-down) organizational structure.

Almost all organizations initially adopt a centralized organizational structure, but may develop other configurations as the company grows. On the other hand, an organization may revert to a centralized structure when faced with extreme pressure or hostility from sources either internal or external to the organization (Mintzberg,

1981). In other words, procedures may be suspended as power returns to the chief executive officer, allowing him or her the opportunity to correct the problem.

In order to accommodate or discourage whistleblowers from going public, an organization may have the characteristics of a centralized structure, but establish a decentralized style of management (Andrews and Herschel, 1996). Within this structure, top management still maintains control over the major organizational functions, such as sales, finance, and human resources whose operations are standard within the organization. Lower-level managers, however, may be afforded some lee-way in decision making as long as a high degree of uniformity remains relative to organizational practices and policies (Andrews and Herschel, 1996). That is, "While the major organizational structure and system remain standardized, the possibility exists for managers to address localized or customized needs" (p. 140). From a whistleblowing perspective, if an employee reports a wrongdoing to his or her immediate supervisor, the supervisor may attempt to provide explanations regarding the wrongdoing in order to eliminate the problem from escalating and involving members of upper management. On the other hand, if the wrongdoing disrupts standard procedures within the organization, the wrongdoing may be corrected by the supervisor without involving upper management. Thus, organizations who operate under a centralized structure, but with a decentralized style of management, encourage and provide observers of corporate or individual wrongdoing the opportunity to initially report such incidents internally to the organization.

Matrix structure

Another structure that has received considerable attention is the matrix. Numerous researchers (Andrews and Herschel, 1996; Burns, 1989; Daft, 1989; Ford and Randolph, 1992; Larson and Gobeli, 1987) have defined the matrix structure. For example, Burns defines the matrix structure as "The particular structural arrangement in

which the two forms operate with balanced priority and authority on a relatively permanent basis. The pure matrix includes a balance of power and joint decision making between functional department heads and project managers . . ." (pp. 350–351). Along those same lines, Larson and Gobeli define a matrix as one in which the standard hierarchy is overlaid by lateral authority, influence, and communication. Finally, Andrews and Herschel perceive a matrix organization as including both vertical and lateral channels of communication operating concurrently with authority.

The definitions cited have certain commonalities. First, the matrix organization consists of communication flowing both laterally and vertically within the organization. The structure contains two separate divisions, namely, functional and project. Vertical information flows into the functional departments, while lateral communication flows within the project. Figure 2 provides an example of a matrix organization.

The traditional functional organization is divided into different areas such as marketing, testing, manufacturing, and operations. Within the functional area, the heads of each group are responsible for their segment of an organization's specific assignment (Larson and Gobeli, 1987). On the other end of the spectrum lies the project organization. Within this organization are the resources necessary for completing a project. These resources "are separated from the regular functional structure and set up as a self-contained team headed by a project manager. The project manager has direct control over all the personnel on the project" (Larson and Gobeli, 1987, p. 127). Thus, the matrix structure allows a two-boss (dual) system, where an employee reports to both the functional and project manager.

The role of power performs a key role within the matrix structure. The matrix allows both managers to possess power within the organizational structure. Whistleblowing research has examined the issue of power in regards to reporting an organizational wrongdoing. According to Miceli and Near (1992), the power of the complaint recipient performs a key role in whether or not whistleblowing is effective. A powerful member of upper management who

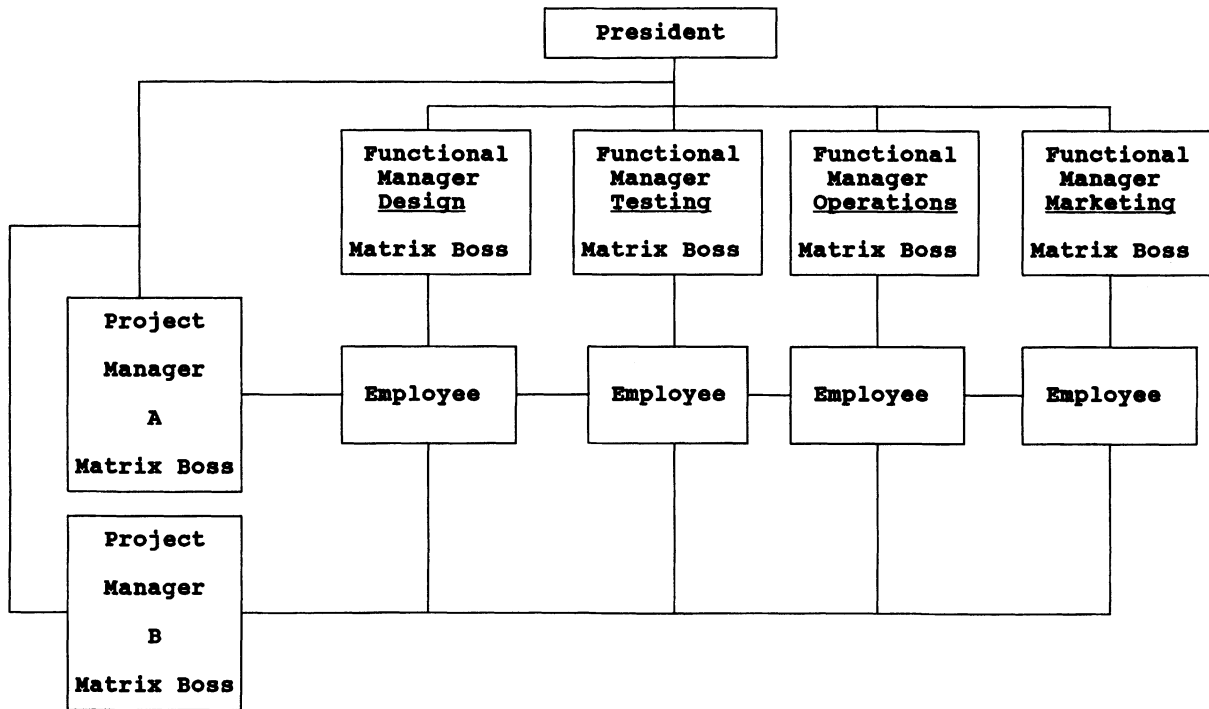


Figure 2. Matrix structure.

supports a whistleblower will provide credibility to the observer of the wrongdoing. In essence, a powerful or high status complaint recipient may enhance the possibility of eliminating the wrongdoing internally without contacting any external agency (Miceli and Near, 1992).

Whistleblowers may find the matrix structure advantageous when confronted with a wrongdoer who is a member of upper management. For example, if the wrongdoer is manager A, the observer may report the incident to manager B, creating an additional outlet or channel for reporting the wrongdoing. Without manager B (matrix), manager A may try to silence the observer (employee) and possibly have the power to do so.

On the other hand, there are a couple of disadvantages of the matrix structure. First, employees of the matrix design report within a dual authority system which may enhance employee frustration and confusion while on the job (Daft, 1989). Second, observers of unethical behavior may perceive problems regarding who should be the recipient of the complaint due to this dual authority structure. Observers of

individual or organizational wrongdoing may not perceive clear and proper channels for reporting a wrongdoing. A complaint may initially be reported to a functional manager only to be referred back to the complainant for discussion and resolution through the project manager.

P₄ Whistleblowers may report observed wrongdoings externally within a matrix structure if clear and proper channels for disclosure are not available.

In order to accommodate a potential whistleblower within a matrix structure, "managers must collaborate with one another rather than solely rely upon vertical authority in decision making" (Daft, 1989, p. 244). Collaboration within a matrix structure allows both managers the opportunity to resolve the wrongdoing internally without the whistleblower involving or contacting agencies external to the organization. Managers who collaborate within a matrix structure exchange ideas and arrive at solutions deemed acceptable by both the observer and the organization. Organizations that operate under

a matrix structure may enhance internal disclosure if employees perceive a collaborative environment by management in eliminating a wrongdoing.

Horizontal structure

An organization may also take on a horizontal structure. The horizontal structure has been defined as “the flow of messages across functional areas at a given level of an organization” (Daniels, Spiker and Papa, 1997, p. 118). In a similar vein, O’Hair, Friedrich and Shaver (1995) perceive the horizontal structure as including the exchange of messages “at the same hierarchial level in the organization” (p. 52).

Various scholars have also defined the horizontal structure from a communication perspective. Daft (1998), for example, refers to horizontal linkage as “the amount of communication and coordination horizontally across organizational departments” (p. 201). Likewise, Andrews and Herschel (1996) note that horizontal communication is the sending of “messages between and among individuals on the same organizational level” (p. 147). Figure 3 provides an illustration of the communication process within the horizontal structure.

Communication performs a central role within the horizontal structure. According to Daniels, Spiker, and Papa (1997), “Horizontal communication introduces flexibility in organizational structure. It facilitates problem solving, informa-

tion sharing across different work groups, and task coordination between departments and project teams” (p. 118). Such sentiments have also been shared by Andrews and Herschel (1996) who note that the horizontal structure encourages cross communication “between and among members of different organizational subunits” (p. 147). Andrews and Herschel further explain that the formal communication channels often used in communicating with members of upper management are disregarded. The horizontal structure allows employees to communicate directly about formal and informal matters across subunits.

Although these factors may prove beneficial for enhancing an organization’s efficiency and performance, the horizontal structure may affect the reporting of a perceived wrongdoing. As noted earlier, the horizontal structure may require contact with people in units that are detached from an employee’s own area. Situations may prevail where an employee’s immediate supervisor or boss may be far removed from the employee, maybe being located in another unit. This may be caused by the reorganization of staff and management, or managerial downsizing within the organization. As such, an employee may find communicating or contacting a supervisor or manager regarding an observed wrongdoing difficult (Daniels, Spiker and Papa, 1997).

As mentioned earlier, although the traditional top-down information process has numerous disadvantages, according to Daniels, Spiker and Papa (1997), it does allow for clear channels of

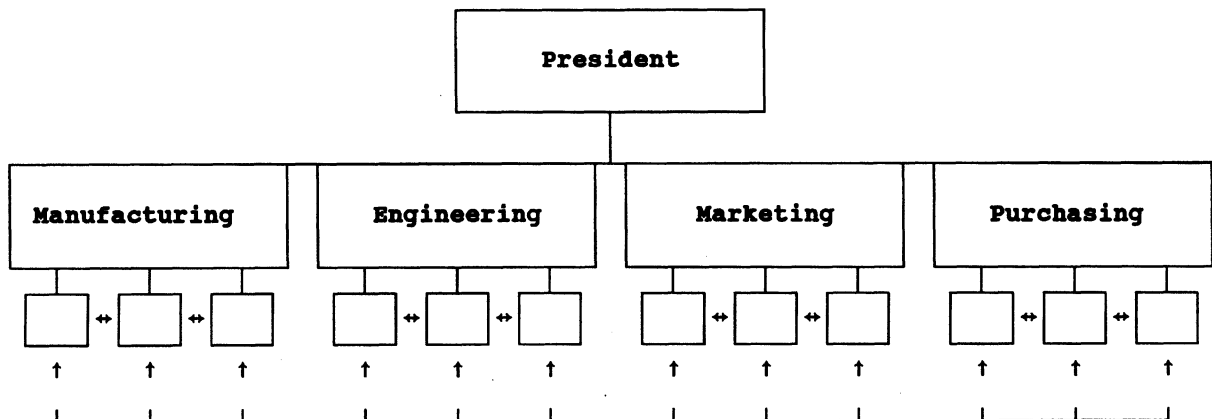


Figure 3. Horizontal structure communication.

communication within the organization. In contrast, communication channels in the horizontal structure may become unclear, distorted, and appear time consuming to some employees (Daniels et al., 1997), leaving a wrongdoing to go unreported internal to the organization.

P₅ Whistleblowers may report observed wrongdoings externally within a horizontal structure if perceptions of communication channels appear unclear, distorted, or awkward.

Organizations that incorporate the horizontal structure might consider implementing a full time ombudsperson. The ombudsperson would not report to a single functional department, but would be located outside the departments. The ombudsperson would be the central complaint recipient for numerous employee and organizational infractions across the functional groups. This clear access to a member outside the functional groups would encourage employee communication of perceived wrongdoings within the organization.

Divisional structure

Organizations may also configure to a divisional structure. The divisional structure is a common configuration found in most large organizations. Commonly referred to as the "M-form" (Andrews and Herschel, 1996), organizations such as General Motors, Ford, and General Electric operate under a divisional structure. According to Mintzberg (1981), an organization may incorporate a divisional structure when its product lines or services are diversified.

A divisional structure may be defined as one that is "organized according to individual products, product groups, services, regions, markets, customers, or major programs" (Daft, 1989, p. 230). Within this type of structure, management has direct responsibility for their own departments operation and performance. Figure 4 provides an example of a divisional structure used within a hospital.

Within the divisional structure each department operates as an autonomous unit. Managers and immediate supervisors have localized authority and control (Andrews and Herschel, 1996) over their departments performance.

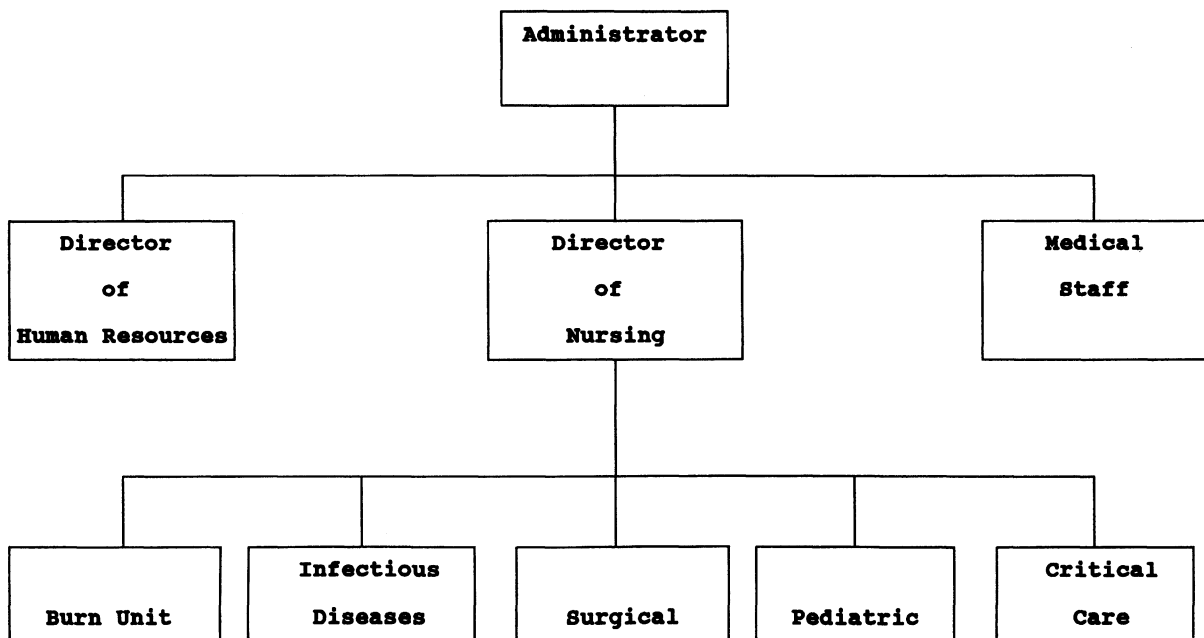


Figure 4. Divisional organizational structure.

Communication with the chief executive officer or administrator may only come under terms of departmental summary reports, procedures, transactions, and policies (Andrews and Herschel, 1996).

There are several benefits of the divisional structure, both from an organizational and whistleblowing perspective. First, as mentioned earlier, the divisional structure is good for large organizations with several products or services (Daft, 1989). Such diversification encourages an organization to establish a market base for each distinct product or service line, "and to grant considerable autonomy to each division to run its own business" (Mintzberg, 1981, p. 110). Second, a divisional structure encourages decentralized decision making "because the lines of authority converge at a lower level in the hierarchy" (Daft, 1989, p. 230). That is, decision making is made within one department and not across departments. Finally, the divisional structure has clear contact points for client (external) and employee (internal) communication (Daft, 1989).

A whistleblowing study (King, 1994) recently found that the divisional structure used within a hospital actually encourages internal reporting of unethical behavior. According to Figure 4, a hospital's nursing department is typically divided by patient services. For example, there is surgical, pediatric, infectious diseases, critical care, burn unit, and numerous other departments that reside within a hospital's nursing department. Each of these services is occupied by an immediate supervisor. Any reports made regarding unethical conduct by a registered nurse or nursing assistant would initially be reported to the immediate supervisor within that department. In situations where the immediate supervisor would require assistance from upper management, the report would be forwarded to a nurse manager within that same service or department. The study further found that reports initially made to the director of nursing would be referred back to the immediate supervisor or nurse manager within that department. Due to these clear and proper channels for reporting unethical behavior, nurses within this study were able to report serious incidents to officials internally to the organiza-

tion rather than using external channels, a finding not indicated in previous whistleblowing studies.

- P₆ Observers of wrongdoing may use internal disclosure channels within a divisional structure due to departmental autonomy, decentralized decision-making, and clear channels for reporting a wrongdoing.

Clearly, the divisional structure has factors that encourage internal disclosure of unethical behavior. As indicated earlier, reports of observed wrongdoings may be hampered if the proper chain of command is unknown (matrix-dual authority structure), distorted (horizontal structure), or restricted (centralized-bureaucratic structure). In such cases, observers of unethical behavior may resort to disclosing individual or corporate wrongdoing anonymously or external to the organization.

Hybrid structure

A final configuration that an organization may portray is the hybrid structure. Sometimes referred to as a combination of product and functional divisions (Daft, 1998), or a mixture of two or more organizational designs (Griffin, 1996), the hybrid structure is becoming widely accepted by many organizations today.

The hybrid structure allows organizations the opportunity to diversify their functional departments into separate business units. This separation provides an organization the opportunity to focus upon a specific market of consumers, as well as enhance the sharing of power between the corporation and its business units (Lentz, 1996). According to Lentz (1996), the "hybrid structure decentralizes decision-making to the operating units and centralizes administrative functions to the corporate staffs. In essence, their operating units act like small companies when dealing with customers but come under the control of the corporation when dealing with cost issues and strategic direction" (p. 454). Figure 5 provides an illustration of the hybrid structure.

There are some advantages to an organization

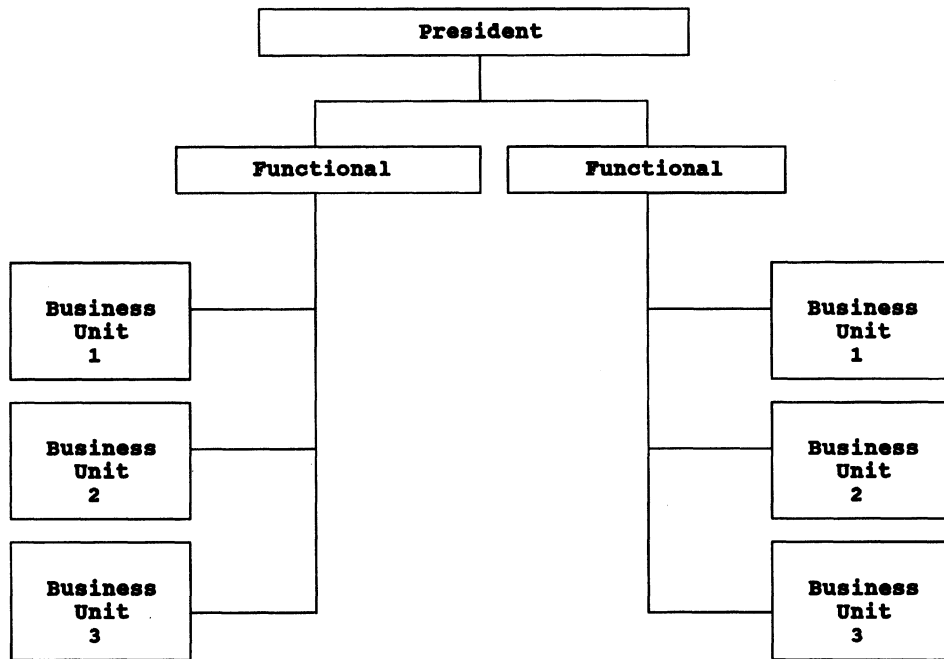


Figure 5. Hybrid organizational structure.

adopting a hybrid structure. First, “authority flows back and forth between the corporation and the business units according to need. Hybrid corporations recognize that their power over information and decision-making has to be shared with the business units in order to achieve the necessary speed of response” (Lentz, 1996, p. 457). In other words, top management must respect the opinions of managers and customers within the business units. Likewise, because business unit managers need corporate direction in achieving strategic goals (Lentz, 1996), decision making and power must be shared within the hybrid structure.

Another advantage of the hybrid structure is that it enables an organization to focus upon a specific business unit while maintaining efficiency in the functional department (Daft, 1998). Finally, the hybrid structure allows for the “alignment between product division and corporate goals. The product groupings provide effective coordination within divisions, and the central functional departments provide coordination across divisions” (Daft, 1998, p. 222).

A major problem, however, with the hybrid structure is the possible build up of administra-

tive overhead. That is, some organizations hire numerous executives to oversee a specific business unit or product division. If left uncontrolled, decision making may become more centralized, leaving the business or product unit unable to adapt to changes in the current market (Daft, 1998).

Internal whistleblowing may be influenced by a hybrid structure. As mentioned earlier, the hybrid structure promotes internal communication between a business unit and upper management (Lentz, 1996). The communication between these two divisions may encourage the use of internal disclosure channels within the organization. That is, a wrongdoing openly resolved by both a business unit and top management, may inspire other employees within the organization to report cases of unethical behavior. Organizations which demonstrate and promote a strong ethical climate, may find internal disclosure channels used more often to report wrongdoings (Barnett, 1993). Due to this open forum of communication between a business unit and upper management, a wrongdoing may be corrected internally without causing damage to the organization’s reputation,

or harming the organization's staff and its employees.

- P₇ Whistleblowers may report wrongdoings internally within a hybrid structure due to the open channels of communication between a business unit and upper management.

Implications

There are several implications that can be inferred from the above material. First, organizational structures that have clear and proper channels for the disclosure of unethical behavior, encourage employees within the organization to use those channels. Past whistleblowing studies found that observers will use external agencies to report unethical behavior due to constraints in communication (Stewart, 1990), or if the whistleblower is uninformed of the channels within the organization for reporting a wrongdoing (Miceli and Near, 1984; Ferguson and Near, 1989).

Second, whistleblowing may be affected by the structural levels within the hierarchy. That is, organizations who establish numerous levels within a department may actually encourage external reporting. For example, Miceli and Near (1992) noted that "The distance between parties to a communication and the number of sequential links it must travel inhibit communication flow. Since in larger organizations there may be more distance or sequential links, there may be less internal whistleblowing . . ." (p. 127). Furthermore, in larger organizations due to the number of sequential links, it is more difficult for managers to make members aware of established channels available within the organization (Miceli and Near, 1992).

Finally, the availability of clear and open channels for the disclosure of organizational wrongdoings may enhance superior and subordinate relations. The observer of a wrongdoing may be more likely to report the wrongdoing internally if there exist a trusting relationship between the complainant and complaint recipient. Stewart (1990), for example, notes that open

communication between a superior and subordinate could alleviate the potential for external whistleblowing. Employees who trust their superiors are more likely to demonstrate upward communication regarding problems in contrast to their colleagues (Near and Miceli, 1985) who use external channels.

Organizations which operate under the constraints of poor communication channels, lack of supervisory trust, a bureaucratic, hierarchial, or centralized control system (Elliston, Keenan, Lockhart and van Schaick, 1985), might consider implementing alternative mechanism within the organization to encourage internal disclosure. One widely recommended method of encouraging internal whistleblowing is the establishment of an ombudsperson (Miceli and Near, 1994; Bok, 1995; Stewart, 1990).

An ombudsperson is "assigned to hear complaints and mediate disputes between parties in an organization" (Tosi, Rizzo and Carroll, 1994, p. 463). The role of the ombudsperson is to meet with employees who have observed wrongdoings, listen to their grievances, investigate the complaints, and point out concerns and perceived ethical abuses to members of top management (Daft, 1995). According to Daft (1995), in order for the system to be successful, the ombudsperson must have direct access to the chief executive office and other members of upper management who could eliminate the wrongdoing. The ombudsperson cannot assume that the decisions made by members of upper management are correct, especially if those decisions affect the employees within the organization (Stewart, 1990). Finally, the person must be able to effectively deal with charges related to illegal or improper conduct by a member or members of upper management, as well as senior executives who are actively promoting the illegal behavior as financially benefitting (Westin, 1981).

Besides the use of an ombudsperson, an organization might consider the use of an internal or in-house review board (Bok, 1995; Miceli and Near, 1994), hot-line, suggestion system, arbitration, internal organizational development consultant, employee assistance program (EAPs), and a host of other avenues that have been explored by ethics researchers (see, for example,

Miceli and Near, 1994, and Bok, 1995) as factors which might enhance internal disclosure of wrongdoings within an organization. Proper implementation of any of these methods is crucial in order to encourage internal whistleblowing. Future research should consider empirically examining the effectiveness of each program in relation to whistleblowing.

In conclusion, due to the lack of empirical research investigating organizational structure, communication, and whistleblowing, the validity of the propositions forwarded should be interpreted with caution. Future research should consider statistically testing each of the assumptions forwarded across various organizations in order to advance the current body of literature on whistleblowing and internal disclosure channels.

This paper is significant, however, because it does provide the first insight into how an organization's structure may affect reports of unethical behavior internal to an organization. Previous whistleblowing studies using federal workers or university students have failed to address this topic (Miceli and Near, 1992). Future researchers interested in communication and organizational dissent should explore these and other postulates as potential elements that may affect whistleblowing.

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