

Whistleblowing and Mindful Organizing in High-Risk Organizations

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DOI: 10.34190/KM.19.205

Abstract: Whistleblowing is 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 & Miceli 1985; 4). In this paper, we examine whistleblowing as a risk management tool in organizations particularly concerned with safety, security and preparedness, including emergency response organizations. In such organizations, failure to disclose illegal and questionable practices may lead to serious accidents with severe consequences, including loss of lives, not only of employees but also of people who live in proximity to such organizations, or are dependent on treatment by such organizations. Reporting of all kinds of near-accidents and failures is an important part of risk management and knowledge sharing in such organizations, in order to prevent future accidents. Sharing experiences and learning from failures require an organizational climate characterized by openness and trust. Our chosen theoretical framework includes variables pertaining to antecedents (including organizational climate) and consequences of whistleblowing. Preliminary results from a pilot study of N = 106 part-time students who have professional backgrounds within safety, security and preparedness, indicate that there is a negative relationship between organizational climate variables pertaining to the “mindful organizing” framework (Weick & Sutcliffe, 2015) (specifically openness and trust between employees and managers) and observations of wrongdoing at the workplace. Among the subset of participants who had actually observed one or more instances of wrongdoing, we tested whether there was a relationship between organizational climate and actually blowing the whistle. The relationship between organizational climate and the following up of whistleblowing by managers was also tested. However, those results were not significant, due to low N. We argue that a climate supporting voice and whistleblowing, building on openness and trust, both can prevent wrongdoing and promote the reporting of wrongdoing in high-risk organizations. Learning from mistakes and sharing of knowledge in the whistleblowing process might lead to better processes in the future. Implications for further research and practice are discussed.

Keywords: whistleblowing, mindful organizing, high-risk organizations, organizational climate, knowledge management, knowledge sharing

1. Introduction

The topic of whistleblowing currently has high actuality, for several reasons. Many major whistleblowing cases have been in the media's spotlight in recent years, and there is great social interest in this phenomenon. The first international whistleblowing studies came in the 1980s. During the 90s and especially after the Enron scandal, the professional interest in studying whistleblowing processes increased (Near & Miceli, 1985). Key research issues have been concentrated on the actual whistleblowing, and issues relating to the whistleblower's situation. Several studies, both nationally (Norwegian) and internationally, focus on reactions to whistleblowing, how are whistleblowers met by their superiors and colleagues, do they receive support or are they exposed to sanctions? (Miceli, Near, Regh & van Scotter, 2012; Trygstad & Ødegaard, 2016; Bjørkelo, 2013). Furthermore, the effectiveness of the whistleblowing is studied: what is the result of the whistleblowing, and does whistleblowing contribute to improvements and changes in the organization (Trygstad, 2017, Miceli & Near, 2016, Miceli, Near & Dworkin, 2008).

Whistleblowing can be associated with risk, and many employees fail to report misconduct and wrongdoing. The Norwegian research organization FAFO recently published (2016, 2017, 2019) reports on whistleblowing and freedom of expression in the workplace, which conclude that it has not become easier for employees to report on misconduct in the workplace in recent years (Trygstad & Ødegaard, 2016; Trygstad, 2017, Trygstad & Ødegaard, 2019). On the contrary, many employees are reluctant to report misconduct for fear of retaliation. This is despite the fact that we have statutory provisions that protect whistleblowers (Trygstad & Ødegaard, 2016; Trygstad et al, 2014; Skivenes & Trygstad, 2012). Researchers argue, however, that whistleblowing can be of great value for organizations because of the importance of correcting the wrongdoing and learn from it. There is a need to increase our knowledge of under what conditions employees are willing to report. What characterizes an organizational climate where employees feel safe and freely can express concerns and report

on organizational wrongdoing? What factors can contribute to greater openness and trust between employees and employers?

1.1 The purpose of the research

The overall objective of this research is to examine factors on the individual, group and organizational level that can explain the outcome of a whistleblowing processes. This includes the steps from observing an act of wrongdoing or misconduct, via actually blowing the whistle, to experiencing the reactions to whistleblowing, including potential reward or even retaliation. Factors that may affect this process include situational and individual characteristics.

The focus of this first pilot study is to explore the effect of organizational climate for trust and openness, when it comes to expressing critical viewpoints that affect the management (see Figure 1). Outcomes of whistleblowing processes are referred to as whistleblowing effectiveness in the literature: Whistleblowing effectiveness is “the extent to which the questionable or wrongful practice (or omission) is terminated at least partly because of whistleblowing and within a reasonable time frame” (Near and Miceli, 1995; 681, Trygstad, 2017; 50). Previous research shows that both individual and situation-dependent variables can explain the variation in the outcome of whistleblowing, and whether employees actually report, or can have intentions to report. When it comes to situation-dependent conditions, both leadership behaviour and the organizational climate have significance. Individual factors that affect notification can be related to personal qualities (e.g., personality type), but also to the type of position, gender, age and experience (Trygstad & Ødegaard, 2016; Trygstad, 2017; Near & Miceli, 2016).

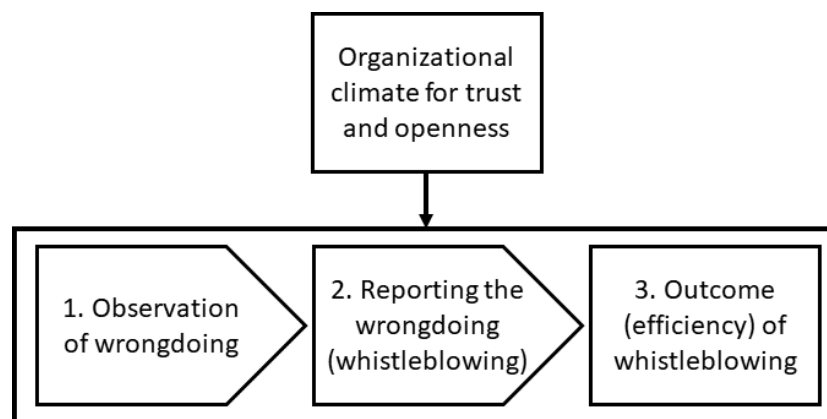


Figure 1: Research model for the pilot study (after Near & Miceli, 1995).

We will here focus on the perception of employees and managers experience of the voice climate in the workplace. We intend to identify factors that are important for developing an open climate of expression that in turn can prevent risks and crises. We understand voice climate as the perceived ability to inform managers and colleagues about your concerns regarding the business, without fear of being sanctioned (Trygstad et al., 2014). Our assumption is that the characteristics of the climate of expression in the organizations will have a major impact on the outcome of the whistleblowing process. Against this background, we have formulated the following research questions:

- What is the relationship between organizational climate (for trust and openness) and observation of wrongdoing at the workplace?
- What is the relationship between organizational climate (for trust and openness) and reporting of the wrongdoing (whistleblowing)?
- What is the relationship between organizational climate (for trust and openness) and outcomes of (whistleblowing effectiveness) the whistleblowing?

2. Theory

2.1 Mindful organization

Weick and Sutcliffe (2015) have studied how businesses are organized and function under circumstances where performance requirement is high, and when the potential for errors that threaten life and health is high (so-

called High Reliability Organizations, HROs). These organizations are for example involved in public transport, energy production, military operations, aviation, and emergency services in hospitals. Despite of the high risk, most of these organizations continue to operate without serious accidents happening (see also Perrow, 1999).

In these businesses, weak signals that are not interpreted correctly and at an early stage are likely to cause serious injuries not only to humans but also to buildings and infrastructure and nature/environment. According to Weick and Sutcliffe (2015), these "HRO" organizations are successful (despite their built-in operational risk) due to their efforts to act mindfully. The idea behind HROs is to organize in such a way that these organizations are better able to notice the weak signals of an unexpected (and unwanted) event, and take appropriate action to deal with the incident.

Mindful organization is about noticing small signals that indicate that something is not as it should be in order to cope with minor issues before they become major disasters. It involves a continuous monitoring of the organization's internal and external environment, and takes the necessary measures quickly and decisively when signs of default appear as "ripples on the ocean surface". As Weick and Sutcliffe (2015) have said, "When a problem begins to unfold, weak signals are difficult to detect but easy to correct. As time goes by, this condition tends to be reversed. Signals become simple to discover, but difficult to correct" (p. 3).

Managing a business where reliability and robustness are key management parameters requires management to receive information on all matters likely to affect safety and security, whether from internal or external sources of information. A safety information system forms the basis of an informed safety culture, where the objective is to prevent unwanted incidents (accidents, etc.), and to limit the consequences of these, at the system and organizational level (Reason, 1997; 2000). Reporting routines that all Norwegian businesses are now required to have (Prop 72 L, 2016-2017), could be an important part of developing a safety information system. However, a reporting routine with formal procedures are not a guarantee that a safety system will work according to the intention.

2.2 Whistleblowing

The most cited definition of whistleblowing in the research literature is: "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 & Miceli 1985; 4). The broad definition includes both internal and external notifications. To distinguish normal reporting from whistleblowing, Trygstad & Skivenes (2010) introduced a classification of weak and strong whistleblowing, where weak whistleblowing means to report to your nearest manager and strong whistleblowing refers to cases where the employee continues to report in other channels, as result of no improvement. Miceli & Near (2013) argue that although there are similarities between organizational voice and whistleblowing, there are also differences. Matters that trigger voice and whistleblowing are not the same, because whistleblowing is a reaction to wrongdoing, while voice includes all kinds of concerns. When voice often are "friendly suggestions", whistleblowing questions manager's authority and ethical judgements.

We apply a broad definition of whistleblowing, in line with what we interpret are the intentions behind the provisions of the legislation, and where "censurable conditions or practices" include everything from illegal actions to violations of ethical guidelines.

2.3 What affects the reporting of wrongdoing

According to Skivenes and Trygstad (2014, p. 112) there is an ongoing discussion about broad or narrow definitions of wrongdoing. The definitions depends on context, both organizational context, national and global context and norms. The most frequently used definition of wrongdoing in empirical research is "illegal, immoral, or illegitimate practices, including omissions, under the control of employers" (Near and Miceli, 1985, p. 4). The broad definition covers all types of sins and omissions, and most researchers in the field support this broad definition (Skivenes and Trygstad, 2014, Miceli et al., 2008). There is a set of variables, both on the individual and organizational levels, which influence how serious employees consider the wrongdoing to be. These variables include legislation, organizational, local and global contexts and norms, the role of the organizational members and the type of organization. Trygstad et al (2014) argue, there is agreement internationally that one should define widely what it is possible to notify. Miethe (1999) argues that it is important to use a broad

definition of wrongdoing. Organizations should support employees to report all kinds of unethical behavior, to make it easy, not difficult, to take the position of a whistleblower.

Due to variations in what can be perceived as worthy of criticism, it is also difficult to compare the occurrence of notification between countries and between sectors. Uncertainty about the seriousness of the observed wrongdoing can be a possible obstacle to employees blowing the whistle. There may be various reasons why "unacceptable conditions" may be perceived differently at different workplaces. According to Skivenes and Trygstad (2014, p. 97), there are six dimensions that influence the assessment of wrongdoing: 1) Perception of the seriousness of wrongdoing can be highly subjective, and others do not necessarily have the same perceptions and reactions to the wrongdoing as the whistleblower (Miceli et al. 2008, Skivenes and Trygstad, 2014). On the other end of the continuum are wrongdoings of a more objective character, such as illegal actions like stealing and corruption. 2) Wrongdoing relates to facts or to values and norms, and people may evaluate differently when it comes to more abstract considerations. 3) Frequency may also affect the perception of the seriousness of wrongdoing. Did it happen once, or often? 4) Is the wrongdoing intentional or unintentional? 5) Is it of public interest? 6) The last dimension is whether the wrongdoing implies vulnerable persons.

Perception of the seriousness of wrongdoing influence on the decision-making process of the observers of wrongdoing and the decision of blowing the whistle or standing by. The perception of the seriousness of the wrongdoing will also influence on the reactions of the recipient of the concerns (Miceli et al.; 2008, Miethé, 1999). Thus, the outcome of the whistleblowing process, defined as whistleblowing effectiveness, highly depends on how employees and employers perceive and interpret the wrongdoing.

Reasons for standing by and not report, can be fear of retaliation, lack of trust in managers or other recipients of the concerns, beliefs that nothing can be done, or will be done, about the problems, uncertainty about the seriousness and evidence of the wrongdoing, or that people simply do not see the problem. (Near, Rehg, Van Scotter & Miceli, 2004). Another possible explanation for non-reporting may be that close relationships between employee and employer, or between colleagues, can hinder whistleblowing. From psychology, we know "the bystander effect" (Kvalnes, 2010). If many people are present, there is less chance that someone will intervene. In some cases this may apply to notification, one expects (or hopes) that others intervene.

The most common conditions that are notified about, is of harassment and bullying, poor management, breach of instructions on health, environment and safety, neglect of services such as abduction, abuse of computer equipment, poor customer care, alcohol and substance abuse (Matthisen, 2008). It turns out that the severity of the offenses is important for whether the intention to blow the whistle is actually realized. Unfortunately, many are reluctant to warn about reprehensible conditions because of fear of retaliation. This is despite the fact that most countries today have statutory provisions that will protect whistleblowers (Mesmer-Magnus & Viswesvaran 2005, Bjørkelo et al., 2013).

The reasons for reporting or non-reporting of wrongdoing is complex, but both the seriousness of the wrongdoing and the organizational context has proven to be important. The first researchers to document that organizational context can explain variation in behaviour (reporting or non-reporting) was Dozier and Miceli (1985). The fact that organizational variables have greater explanatory power than individual characteristics and motives is also documented in later studies (Near & Miceli 1995, Miceli & Near 2002, Trygstad et al., 2014).

2.4 The role of organizational context

According to Trygstad et al (2014), recipients of concerns respond differently to the situation. This is especially true for managers who receive reports. They claim that this is mainly due to two factors. One is that managers have insufficient knowledge of the legal provisions and whistleblowing routines, and the other is related to the climate of expression in the workplaces. The company's climate of expression proves to be of central importance to whether employees both intend to notify, and that they have in fact reported unacceptable practices. The climate of expression also has an impact on colleagues' reactions.

Organizational culture is defined by Bang (2011) as the sets of commonly shared norms, values and perceptions that evolve in an organization when members interact with each other and the environment. The literature discusses the conceptual content of organizational climate and organizational culture, and the most common concept clarification is to understand the organizational culture as the more fundamental and deeper value

orientation in organizations, consisting of both cultural content and cultural expressions (Bang 2011; Denison, 1996). Here, the cultural content will be the basic assumptions and values, while the visible expressions the culture may have are to be perceived as "climate".

The organizational climate can thus be an expression of a more fundamental organizational culture and is the perception that employees have of the working environment, moods and manners in the workplace. The organizational climate may appear with different characteristics; innovation climate, identified by, among others, Ekvall (1996), the speech climate, discussed by, among others, Kvalnes (2010) and ethical climate as described by Victor & Cullen (1987, 1988). The importance of developing a climate in organizations to build openness and trust to prevent unwanted and fraudulent behavior among employees and managers is documented through several studies (Wimbush and Shepard, 1994; Cullen et al., 2003; Mayer et al., 2010).

2.5 The whistleblowing process

A whistleblowing process is complex and consists of different phases (NOU 2018:6). The whistleblowing process starts with the observing of the wrongdoing and the decision of the observer to blow the whistle or not, through internal or external channels. Further stages of the process are the receiving of the concern, including the decisions and reactions of the recipient. The last stages of the process describe if, and in what ways, the problems are solved. Finally, in an ideal process, the process is evaluated and steps are taken to learn and discuss how to treat similar situations, problems, and concerns (NOU 2018: 6). The outcomes of each step in a whistleblowing process depends on both individual and situational factors concerning the issue at stake, the power and position of the whistleblower, the wrongdoer, and the recipient of the concern (Near and Miceli, 1995). Recently, Storhaug Hole et al. (2019) discussed how organizations learn in the aftermath of whistleblowing. In addition to correcting the wrongdoing, it is also important to focus on the underlying problems and the origins of the wrongdoing. Theory and practice from organizational learning and knowledge management can be of great value for managers through whistleblowing processes, both concerning organizational member's motivation to learn and share experiences, and how to structure learning processes in the aftermath.

2.6 Knowledge sharing and learning from whistleblowing processes

Different perspectives have triggered different definitions of knowledge management (KM) (Hislop, 2003). Davenport's definition of knowledge management says that KM is about capturing, distributing, making sense and use of knowledge (Davenport, 1994). A wide definition by Mc Adam and Mc Creedy (2000) states that KM relates to the management of anything classified as knowledge. Theoretical knowledge "knowing what" and procedural knowledge "knowing how" is important related to whistleblowing processes. Research shows that knowledge of whistleblowing routines, whistleblowing legislation and organizational procedures contribute to better outcomes of the whistleblowing process (Trygstad et al., 2018). Sharing of experiences and evaluation of the process in the aftermath of whistleblowing, will also contribute to better outcomes of the whistleblowing (NOU, 18:6). An organizational climate of trust and openness makes knowledge sharing and learning from experience, and especially learning from failures and mistakes, easier. An organizational climate of openness, trust and psychological safety is one important prerequisite for sharing of knowledge and learning from experiences (Edmondson, 1999).

3. Method

The first (pilot) study targeted students in the crisis and emergency preparedness programs (BA level) at the Inland Norway University of Applied Sciences, Campus Rena, in the spring of 2018. These are students where most of them are in daily work in emergency preparedness, security, safety and crisis management, for example in the police, defense, fire, health, and public administration (for example with emergency planning). A total of 163 students answered the survey. Of these, 41% were women and 56% men, while 3% did not want to disclose their gender. Age was set in intervals, and the largest number of respondents fell into the interval 25-34 years, with 36% of the participants. Some of the respondents did not answer all questions, so N is variable.

We used a version of Weick & Sutcliffe's HERO survey, translated into Norwegian, to form cultural variables aimed at trust, openness and climate of expression in high-reliability organizations (HROs). (The original survey is located at <https://www.mro.net/MRODocuments/MRO%20HERO%20Survey.pdf>). Through an exploratory factor analysis, four factors were extracted, of which the two most obvious were labelled "Openness towards

Leaders" and "Trust between Colleagues". These have six items each (questions with loading $\geq .5$ on the primary factor were included), and satisfactory Cronbach's Alpha (.93 and .85 respectively), which is a measure of the scale's reliability. Sample items for the HERO derived variable "Openness towards Leaders" are "People feel free to talk to superiors about problems" and "People feel free to bring up problems and tough issues". Sample items for the HERO derived variable "Trust between Colleagues" are "People trust each other" and "People show considerable respect for one another".

In addition to the HERO questions, new questions were formulated to represent the dependent variables reflecting each of the three model stages of the whistleblowing process (figure 1). These were as follows: 1) "I have observed or experienced wrongdoing at my workplace", 2) "I have reported (one or more) instances of wrongdoing at my workplace", and 3) "When I reported wrongdoing, it was properly handled by the appropriate actors". These questions were labeled "Observed Wrongdoing", "Reported Wrongdoing" and "Handled Wrongdoing" for short.

4. Results

Table 1 below shows the correlation matrix between the HERO variables "Openness towards Leaders" and "Trust between Colleagues", and the dependent variables "Observed Wrongdoing", "Reported Wrongdoing" and "Handled Wrongdoing". Reliability coefficient (Cronbach's Alpha) is indicated on the diagonal of the two HERO variables. Valid N is indicated in parentheses.

Table 1: Bivariate correlations, Cronbach's Alpha, and valid N.

	1	2	3	4
1 HERO: Openness towards Leaders (6 items)	.93			
2 HERO: Trust between Colleagues (6 items)	.57*** (105)	.85		
3 Observed Wrongdoing	-.31** (106)	-.25* (106)		
4 Reported Wrongdoing	.11 (33)	.13 (34)	N/A (40)	
5 Handled Wrongdoing	.37 (14)	.01 (15)	.11 (17)	-.11 (10)

Note: *** $p < .001$; ** $p < .01$; * $p < .05$

Table 1 also shows that the two HERO variables are positively correlated ($r = .57$, $p < .001$). Furthermore, the HERO variable "Openness towards Leaders" is negatively correlated ($r = -.31$) with "Observed Wrongdoing" ($p < .01$), and the HERO variable "Trust between Colleagues" is negatively correlated ($r = -.25$) with "Observed Wrongdoing" ($p < .05$). Thus, when openness and trust is high, observations of wrongdoing is low. None of the other bivariate correlations is significant. Note that if the relation between openness, trust and reported wrongdoing had been significant positive, it would have suggested that more openness and trust was associated with more reporting of wrongdoing. Indication of N / A in the table means that there was no variation in the data to yield a valid correlation for this pair of variables.

5. Discussion

If the expression climate is perceived as open, and characterized by mutual trust, chances are greater for employees to confide in their managers and colleagues. Trust and openness are the prerequisites for building a safe climate of expression, where employees can express themselves freely, and where it is safe to express criticism. Openness and trust in the Norwegian police force are discussed by Aas (2015) and Granås et al (2015). They point out that the terms of expression in the agency vary. Mortvedt (2016) also points to issues that inhibit freedom of speech internally in the Norwegian police force. Rotwell & Baldwin (2006) have discussed the "code of silence" in the police forces. They conclude that the characteristics of this organizational climate can hamper open speech and expression of criticism. Mannion & Davis (2015) discusses "cultures of silence and voice" in health care, and emphasize the importance of developing an organizational culture based on openness, and allowing critical expression. An organizational climate characterized by silence does not support voice and whistleblowing.

The outcomes of a whistleblowing processes depend much on managerial responses and the organizational climate (Trygstad & Ødegaard, 2016; Near & Miceli 2016). Managerial responses characterized by neglect, denial and postponement may have negative impact on the outcomes of whistleblowing processes. Thus, managers' handling of whistleblowing cases is of crucial importance for the outcome (Near & Miceli, 2016). Studies of managerial handling of whistleblowing cases and their responses to reported misconduct should be further investigated, according to Lewis, Brown & Moberly (2014). If managers are involved in the whistleblowing, this will affect the effectiveness of whistleblowing, that is, whether the case is resolved within a reasonable time (Trygstad, 2017). There is therefore a need to study more closely what characterizes recipients of whistleblowing; their handling and reactions.

Furthermore, it turns out that organizational cultures and the climate of expression in the workplace are of great importance both for whether employees blow the whistle and for the outcome of the whistleblowing. Conditions that affect employees' terms of expression should therefore be studied further (Trygstad, 2017; Near & Miceli, 2016). We argue that our pilot study is a contribution to the research on whistleblowing by the investigation of the relationship between the dimensions of HRO and actual whistleblowing, and the relationship between the dimensions and observing of wrongdoing, and managerial handling of wrongdoing. Important dimensions of a climate supporting whistleblowing in high risk organizations proved to be openness towards leaders and trust between colleagues.

Our contribution to the research field of knowledge management is to point at similarities between organizational climates supporting knowledge management and climates supporting whistleblowing and learning from whistleblowing processes. These climates are characterized by trust and openness. Management of whistleblowing is also about managing of knowledge, concerning the theoretical “know what” (the concepts of whistleblowing and wrongdoing) and the “know how” (whistleblowing processes and whistleblowing procedures and routines). Outcomes of whistleblowing processes depend on individual and situational factors and managers' handling of the cases is critical for a positive result.

5.1 Strengths and weaknesses, and further work

An important weakness of our study is of course the low number of participants, which is understandable in light of this being a pilot. However, our anonymous respondents are in relevant working positions, and we have achieved reliability of the measures, which increases the credibility of our results. In future studies, we will not only include more variables in the operationalized research model, we will also differentiate between intended and actual whistleblowing (Bjørkelo & Bye, 2014).

6. Conclusions

With this pilot study, we have demonstrated that central variables associated with freedom of expression in an organization, namely openness towards leaders and trust between colleagues, are closely related to several stages of the whistleblowing process, from initial observation of wrongdoing and to the outcome of the process. When it comes to method, we have derived two new scales that operationalize the conceptual variables openness and trust, from an existing questionnaire (HERO), and demonstrated that the resulting scales have desirable psychometric properties.

Our results point to the utility of fostering a “generative” organizational culture (Westrum, 2004). The characteristics of such a culture includes high cooperation among employees who are the primary sources of information, educating the employees in reporting, sharing of risks, and encouragement to stand forward even with critical information. Even rewarding informants (regardless of whether the information is negative or critical), and in fact implement changes that prevent wrongdoing from occurring in the future, is inherent in this culture (Westrum, 2004).

To sum up: The research model (Figure 1) depicts three separate, but sequentially interlinked, stages of the whistle-blowing process that each are hypothesized to be affected by organizational climate for trust and openness: observation of wrongdoing; reporting of the wrongdoing (whistleblowing); and outcome of the whistleblowing. As the results in Table 1 show, we have succeeded in establishing a consistent measure of organizational climate, with individual variables (Openness towards Leaders and Trust between Colleagues) that are linked to each of the process variables. It will be left for further research (full-scale studies) to fill in a more

complete picture of this important area of research on organizational climate and whistleblowing that also has profound impact for knowledge management in organizations.

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