

Whistleblowing in the Fortune 1000: What PR Practitioners Think and Do

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Whistleblowing has been a topic of media interest since the Vietnam War, and it continues to resonate strongly with the public. Whistleblowing refers to the reporting of illegal, wasteful, or unethical activities (i.e., wrongdoing) by current and former employees of an organization. Triggered by several highly publicized corporate financial failures, the Sarbanes-Oxley Act of 2002 requires publicly traded companies to provide an anonymous channel for employees to report financial wrongdoing and provides protection for those who do.

The presenter contends that whistleblowing, as defined by the federal government and researchers in other fields, includes the normal activities of public relations practitioners acting as boundary spanners and advisors to management. To investigate this theory, she distributed an online survey to top-ranking public relations executives in the Fortune 1000 corporations to identify what role they had played in developing and publicizing anonymous whistleblowing channels, their knowledge of wrongdoing in their own organizations and elsewhere, their attitudes and actions related to the wrongdoing, the consequences of their actions, and their relationships with their organizations.

The results were surprising. Few helped develop the whistleblowing channel, but a majority helped publicize the channel; almost half were aware of wrongdoing, and most of those reported it; the majority of those who reported did not think it was their job to report it; those who reported it generally did so through internal, but not anonymous, channels; some experienced retaliation; and the vast majority enjoyed positive relationships with their organizations.

What does it say about the state of ethics in the practice of public relations that public relations practitioners know about wrongdoing in their organizations; they report wrongdoing internally; but they don't feel ethically obligated to do so. Participants will be asked to discuss the extent to which they believe status, relationships and benefits such as the "golden handcuffs" influence whistleblowing.

The presenter provides a definition of whistleblowers, outlines protections for whistleblowers, and addresses provisions of Sarbanes-Oxley that are important to public relations. She also explores the relationships Fortune 1000 public relations practitioners have with their organizations, addresses what her findings mean for current public relations theories, and suggests a path public relations practitioners might pursue to improve the climate for whistleblowing within their organizations.