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Whistleblowing in Sport: Psychological challenges

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Play the Game. Eindhoven

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Scandals in Sport world



Scandals in Sport world: the whistleblowers reaction



WHISTLEBLOWER 1

BONITA MERSIAIDES: former head of corporate affairs in the Australia 2022 bid. Highly respected PR professional and sports administrator. She left the bid team after disagreeing with a policy to influence ExCo votes with money for pet projects.



WHISTLEBLOWER 2

PHAEDRA ALMAJID: former head of international media relations for the Qatar 2022 bid. Left in early 2010 having become disillusioned with the bid. Unhappy at some of the methods and expenditure Qatar were undertaking.





Hot lines



Whistleblowers

Reporting Channels



- UCI Anti-Doping Rules: requirement on riders and support personnel to report any anti-doping rule violation (Section 21)
- FIFA (2013): “Reporting Mechanism”, a portal that offers an opportunity for employees, persons bound by the FIFA to notify potential violations.”
- IOC (2015): a whistleblower hotline.
- The Director General of WADA, Olivier Niggli, announced in July 2016 that:

“As I begin my mandate as Director General, WADA will focus ever more on key priorities, which include: [...] implementing a new whistleblower program.

- The appeal to these mechanisms has two meanings.
 - It means assuming that sport is not as clean as it was supposed to be.
 - In addition to those who break the law, there are other members of the sports family who do not show the desired level of loyalty to the principles of sport, those who are not willing to reveal that among their teammates or work colleagues there are those who violate the rules for their own benefit.

To sum up, it is a sign of a certain failure of the tools that the world of sport has used up to now in its effort to eradicate corruption, match fixing, doping, etc. And now we have to resort to an alternative or complementary plan, self-regulation, which involves delegating to the members of the sports family themselves the detection and disclosure of the infractions.

An evaluation of the whistleblowing schemes in sport organisations:

1. Structural failures in that whistleblowing programs

- The information is not particularly detailed. No provision the users with guidance or worked examples as to the sort of concerns that should be raised.
- There is no mention of any Reports being made regularly (at least annually) as to the effectiveness of the mechanism. The whistleblowers don't know nothing about the success or failure of its disclosure. They are not incentivised to make future disclosures
- The irregularities to be disclosure are limited to the activity sphere of the respective sport organization: AMA-doping, UEFA/FIFA-match fixing...
- No mention is made as to the specific protection offered to whistleblowers.
- No special mention to data protection.

It would be wrong to assume that a rarely used whistleblowing procedure is effective because there were no concerns raised.

This restrictive approach substantially limits the role of sport organizations and inhibit disclosures by those with critical information.

2. Psychological failures in that whistleblowing programs

- The scarce results of official reporting channels in sports organizations demands questioning the particularity of sport, as a social sphere especially refractory to the emergence of whistleblowers.
- in addition to the general causes that explain the reluctance to report of employees (fear of losing job or suffer retaliation from the organization), there is another phenomenon that is usually alluded to explain this passivity in disclosing of infractions in the sporting sphere: **omerta**

A convention that is, most of the times, implicit among team members which its goal is to keep irregularities in secret.

Such a phenomenon is antithetical to the practice that promotes whistleblowing and ethical and integrity policy in sports.

Psychological failures in that whistleblowing programs

- The fight for integrity in sport demands the recognition by the governing bodies that there is a culture of omertà among athletes and managers. Breaking such a code is essential to promote whistleblowers.
- And achieving this goals requires offering them protection against internal and external threats.
- However, there is a conceptual problem in the characterization of the sport omertà: the distinction in relation to similar phenomena, such as cohesion and group loyalty, **psychological traits that are promoted in sport as factors that benefit sports performance.**

Cohesion and loyalty can be the previous step and the objective condition prior to the omertà because they generate a "false consensus effect" in which the members of the group perceive their own actions as common behaviors. Anomalous behavior, then, becomes a subculture or way of life, in which the perception of legitimacy is essential for the resilience of the group.

Psychological failures in that whistleblowing programs

- But how can we explain the jump from cohesive or loyal behaviors - which, in most cases are positive for the realization of the group's ends - to behaviors that are contrary to ethics or law? It could be interesting applying to sports the contribution of group psychology, even neuroscience and their explanation of some determinant bias. A basic contribution comes from sociology of organizations.
- Watts and Buckley points out that an important factor is that some organizations adopt "toxic" patterns, one of them being precisely the reward of silence.

Psychological failures in that whistleblowing programs

- A toxic organizational culture is characterized by
 - (1) poor communication of ethical standards,
 - (2) weak credibility of leaders,
 - (3) widespread lack of personal accountability for reporting or correcting organizational wrongdoing,
 - (4) lack of support for employee decision making,
 - (5) rewarding employee silence,
 - (6) punishing internal reporting, and
 - (7) inadequate access to legitimate reporting channels.

To promote a ethical code among the members of a sport team implies to set up polices against this traits common in toxic organizations. That's the way of avoiding that loyalty and cohesion becomes omertà.