Chapter 5
The Morality of Reporting Safety Concerns in Aviation

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ABSTRACT

A previous investigation into the morality of actions suggested that individuals' levels of cognitive moral development strongly influence their decisions regarding what is right or wrong, and focused upon the rights, duties, and obligations involved in a particular ethical situation. Using the cognitive moral development framework, this chapter sought to explore the moral reasoning behind aviation employees' intentions to report wrongdoing in the aviation context. Findings indicated that a significant association between participants' intentions to intervene in a wrongdoing situation and their level of moral reasoning exists. Specifically, the modal level of participants' moral reasoning was consistent with the conventional level of moral theories and was higher for participants who stated that they would intervene than for participants who stated they would not intervene in a wrongdoing situation.

INTRODUCTION

Previous investigation into the morality of actions suggested that individuals' level of cognitive moral development, strongly influences their decisions regarding what is right or wrong, and focuses upon the rights, duties and obligations involved in a particular ethical situation. Using the cognitive moral development framework, this research sought to explore the moral reasoning behind aviation employees' intentions to report wrongdoing in the aviation context. Specifically, looking at whether an association between participants' intentions to intervene in a wrongdoing situation, and their level of moral reasoning exists. This research covers one of the important issues that affect safety management in organisations, and provides opportunities on how it can be improved.

BACKGROUND

The role of employees in the prevention and detection of wrongdoing within organisations has been widely acknowledged (Camerer, 2001; Sawyer, 2005; KMPG, 2008). Up to 80% of incidents are believed to be unreported within organisations (NZALPA, 2005). It can be argued that by reporting wrongdoing, employees could provide information that can be used proactively by organisations to improve safety practice at the workplace. However, viewpoints about reporting vary considerably. Individual values, corporate values, cultural environment and personal benefits are but some of the few elements that decide whether the action of reporting is an important source of information (Kohn & Kohn, 1988), or whether it is a disloyal act deserving punishment (Lewis, 2001). Whatever la raison d'être of reporting may be, it can be argued that reporters of wrongdoing are highly devoted to their cause, determined to defeat silence and act in a way that they perceive right. Such individuals find themselves balancing conflicting loyalties, obligations and values none of which are right or wrong (Dehn, 1999). There is a conflict between the right to privacy and the right to know; employer and colleagues' loyalty vis à vis the good citizen's duty to uphold the law; and the conflict between individualism and being a team player (Camerer, 2001). Set against these imperatives is the fear of being disloyal and losing the trust of the employer and colleagues, the fear of being wrong, and the fear of accepting responsibility for one's actions and their resulting consequences (Dehn, 1999).

MAIN FOCUS OF THE STUDY

There are two frameworks within which under-reporting of aviation wrongdoing could be explored: a moral framework, and an evolutionary framework. The moral framework assumes that the person witnessing wrongdoing does what they believe to be the 'right thing', within the limits of their understanding of right and wrong. In other words, participants' responses could be related to their level of moral development. Kohlberg's (1976) and Gilligan's (1982) cognitive moral development theories are two prominent theories which propose that individuals' progress in stages of moral reasoning and tend to operate at a particular stage at any point in time. Kohlberg's cognitive stages of moral development propose that an individual's level of cognitive moral development strongly influences their decision regarding what is right or wrong and focuses upon the rights, duties and obligations involved in a particular ethical situation. Contrarily, Gilligan defines ethical issues mainly in terms of helping others and minimising harm and argues that moral behaviour results from meeting one's obligations and responsibilities to others.

As the level of people's moral judgment can be raised by education (Kohlberg, 1984; Oderman, 2002; Peters, 2015), the first aim of this study was to investigate aviation employees' level of moral reasoning when confronted with wrongdoing situations. If a relationship between reporting intentions and moral development is suggested, then ethics education may be one means by which under-reporting in aviation can be reduced. The following hypothesis was therefore proposed:

Hypothesis 1: Aviation employees indicating they would intervene upon becoming aware of aviation wrongdoing operate at a higher level of moral development than aviation employees who would not intervene in a wrongdoing situation.

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