

Whistleblowing Canada Research Society

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Submission to :

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Government Response to the COVID 19 Pandemic
Title: Improving Government Response by Addressing Culture and
Building (Re-building) Trust

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Improving Government Response by addressing Culture and Building (Re-building) Trust

It goes without saying that the COVID 19 pandemic has presented the worst crisis for governments to manage in a century if not in our history. To manage any crisis successfully one of the key things a leader must do is to build or even re-build trust. Mistakes will be made and governments will be criticized, but honest mistakes are more easily accepted by the public if they have the information they need to make sense of what is going on. Declining trust in government in Canada was an issue even before the pandemic struck – from 60% in 1960 to 28% in 2012.² It is now a critical issue i.e. public demonstrations, anti-maskers, resistance to public health rules, conspiracy theories, increase in deaths, increase in cases, etc. This is complicated by a post-truth era where the attack on truth has gone to what we would have considered unimaginable extremes just a few years ago³ and aroused the anxiety of Canadians that it could even happen here.

It is acknowledged one of the ways to build trust in a crisis is to communicate frequently, openly and honestly about what is going on so people are able to make sense of things happening in the chaos around them. However, Leaders must not only *say* they are doing so openly and honestly, and pass laws that say we are open and honest (i.e. Access to Information and PSPDA) but they must *demonstrate* they, and those implementing the laws are actually doing what they say they are doing and what our laws say we must.

This brings us to the question of culture and the impact leaders' modeled *behaviour* has on culture and the behaviour of the members of the organization. If a leader says one thing (i.e. passes laws and policies) but then through his/her actions sends out contrary signals (by what behaviours s/he rewards or punishes, by who s/he hires or fires, what policies he promotes or not, etc.), others in the organization pick up these cues.

Here is where governments are vulnerable to increasing *distrust* rather than increasing *trust* as the implementation of our whistleblower protection law demonstrates. Statistics from a 2019 survey of Federal public servants show that more than 50% of public servants do not feel they can safely raise concerns.⁴ Mixed federal messages on the government's sincerity and commitment to *actually* protecting whistleblowers have apparently signaled to public sector managers this is not a priority. Examples of this would be conducting a review aimed at improving the PSDPA and then inappropriately not addressing or implementing the recommended amendments to the PSDPA which was the purpose of the review in 2017 – unanimous OGGO Report No. 9. Another loud signal that protecting whistleblowers was not a priority was that sent by the previous government which simply did not even conduct the review in 2012 as mandated in legislation. It would seem many managers have picked up the signals and cues as indicated by the survey. An unwelcoming culture – as signaled by political leaders - has perpetuated rather than a culture of speaking –up, one of silence and fear.

This should be a red flag especially at this time, and could result in great harm as past history has demonstrated. If the pandemic is ever going to be controlled, governments and Canadians in general need to know what is really going on in our workplaces – federal and provincial, public and private.

¹ James, E. "Leadership as (Un)usual: How to Display Competence In Times of Crisis" (PDF). [Organizational Dynamics. 2005](#)

² Savoie, Donald. [Democracy in Canada: The Disintegration of Our Institutions](#), Sept. 2019.

³ 2020 US election "big lie" – "The election was stolen" and other governments around the world.

⁴ Friday, Joe. Public Sector Integrity Commissioner. Appearance before Standing Committee on Government Operations and Estimates. Opening Remarks – February 25, 2019. <https://www.psic-isp.gc.ca/en/joe-fridays-opening-remarks-oggo-april-26-2018>

Empowering workers to safely raise worker safety concerns in essential services and in resumption of work in the federal public service and in federally regulated industries, fraud on government emergency programs, etc. would be a step to building trust again. However, it requires clear messaging on *an on-going basis* from political leaders to transform a culture. If the political leaders messages are loud and clear to their DM's, voila, bureaucratic culture will change very quickly.

There are other invisible/unconscious psychological processes such as perceived threats as a result of whistleblowing actions occurring amongst employees impacting culture, and ethical climate and driving reprisals. Our organization is conducting [webinars](#) next week to share the results of our research on this topic and they are open to the public. Training on this topic should take place in all organizations including government.

1. Recommendations: Re-consider implementing the amendments to the Public Servants Disclosure Protection Act PSDPA

A loud and clear signal would be – and - It would not cost much - for this government to re-consider the unanimous recommendations of OGGO Report No. 9 of 2017, ask for the agreement of the other parties to pass the amendments built on best practices and immediately convene an all - party committee to oversee the implementation. This should be accompanied by a strong information/education campaign to public servants about current processes and their rights under the law. This would send out a clear message across the country that truth and truth-tellers are important to Canada's government, build trust and we believe, save lives in the process.

Even with the amendments passed, the law only covers a woefully small number of employees in Canada. It covers only a fraction of Federal public servants and none in the private sector i.e. federally regulated industries and the non-profit sector. This should be addressed by expanding the coverage of the act as soon as possible.

2. Appoint a special National Ombudsperson as per CCAG's recommendation

In the Interim, accepting the proposal put forward last year by [CCAG](#), of a special Ombudsperson position would quickly fill the gap until the amendments are passed and send a message to provinces too. It would demonstrate - by action – that building trust and confidence through openness (Access to Information), and supporting truth-tellers who are trying to warn us of potential harm – is a Canadian value the government wholeheartedly supports.

3. Ongoing Training for Disclosure Officers, Managers and all other employees on whistleblowing mechanisms, conflict resolution skills, ethics and the invisible psychological forces driving reprisals.

In addition to leaders' behaviours, employees' perceptions of threats as a result of whistle-blowing also drive reprisals. We will begin to share our research findings next week through [webinars](#) . Training on this topic should take place in all organizations including government.

Whistleblowing Canada Research Society is the only non-profit, charitable, civil society organization in Canada dedicated to advancing education on the whistleblowing phenomenon through research and sharing the results publicly. Our Board and Advisory Board come from across Canada and includes academics, whistleblowing practitioners, whistleblowers, interested professionals and international experts.