

*The Church in the 21st Century*  
*The Church in the 21st Century: Occasional*  
*Papers*

---

*Boston College*

*Year 2003*

---

What Can We Do About Unethical  
Organizational Silence?"

Richard P. Nielsen  
Boston College, richard.nielsen.1@bc.edu

***"What Can We Do About Unethical Organizational Silence?"***

Synopsis

The author's research suggests a spectrum of effective responses to unethical organizational conduct; he considers five here. The extended references that follow give many practical examples.

About the Author

Richard Nielsen is Professor of Organizational Studies in The Wallace E. Carroll School of Management at Boston College and director of doctoral studies. He is the author of *The Politics of Ethics: Methods for Acting, Learning, and Sometimes Fighting, With Others In Addressing Ethics Problems in Organizational Life*. New York: Oxford University Press.

---

---

1. "Forcing" methods: varieties of whistle-blowing

While we may very much admire people who have the courage to publicly blow the whistle, organizational ethics research strongly indicates that unnuanced public whistle blowing can damage both organizational and family lives. Fortunately, there are forcing methods that are both effective and relatively safe. For example, one can secretly blow the whistle inside or outside the organization rather than publicly blow the whistle and risk the direct and indirect retaliations against whistle blowers and their families that is so common. One can write an unsigned letter to powerful people inside the organization alerting them to the unethical behavior in the hopes that ethical powerful people will do something about the unethical behavior. One can even secretly threaten the offender with exposure if they do not stop the unethical behavior. One can secretly blow the whistle to the press or the government.

2. Crafting win-win solutions

"Win-win" negotiating type methods can be used to address controversial ethics issues (Gauthier, 1986; Nielsen, 1989). For example, in the wake of the current United States corruption scandals in the financial services and accounting industries, the parties involved are trying to work out solutions for separating investment banking from research advisory services and auditing from management consulting services. On a more micro level, it is sometimes possible to offer a crook a well paying and honest job and with that win-win alternative, the crook sometimes chooses the honest job and stops being a crook. Sometimes, the old saying that one can "do well by doing good" is quite true. Unfortunately, it is also true that for some people in some situations, they can win more financial and political rewards by being a crook than by being ethical.

3. Dialogic methods

Dialogic methods can sometimes be effective. While Socrates was executed for his ethical questioning and criticism, it is also true that Socratic dialog was effective in Ancient Greece and at times is effective today.

Dialogic methods can be both effective and relatively non-threatening. It is possible to learn how to discuss sensitive issues in an effective problem solving and non-threatening, professional, and even friendly ways (Gadamer, 1989; Nielsen, 1990).

#### 4. Resort to third-parties

A fourth set of methods in addition to forcing methods, win-win methods, and dialog methods is third party methods (Nielsen, 2000b). That is, when people are unable or unwilling to discuss organizational ethical issues directly, third party mediation and arbitration methods are sometimes available. For example, many organizations have various types of internal due process systems available for processing ethics issues when the parties are able or willing to address the issues directly. Among the various types of systems are investigation and punishment systems, grievance and arbitration systems, mediator-ombudsmen systems, and employee board systems. There are vast differences among these systems with respect to levels of protection for the accused, discretion of the powerful with respect to which issues and people to investigate, and political space with respect to how deeply to go into the more fundamental causes of the problems.

#### 5. Strength in numbers: resort to broad social movements

A fifth set of methods are social movement methods that are used when the problem is bigger than individuals and organizations (Davis and Thompson, 1994; Nielsen, 2000a). Sometimes, it is necessary for multiple organizations and groups to work together in order to make an ethical difference. For example, in the civil rights, environmental, health care, and corruption reform arenas it has often been necessary for universities, churches, legal, media, and business organizations and groups to work together to make ethical changes. To paraphrase Edmund Burke, good people can associate to oppose unethical combinations and build ethical organizations and societies.

#### In Conclusion

As we know, the bad news is that there is enormous and even deafening silence when it comes to many organizational ethics situations. There are very powerful forces that cause these phenomena. The good news is that these forces and obstacles can be understood and there are both micro and macro methods that can be learned and sometimes applied effectively. Understanding the obstacles and the methods for overcoming the obstacles can help enable individual and organizational ethical character.

#### *References*

Argyris, Chris, Robert Putnam, and D.M. Smith. 1985. *Action Science*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Alford, C. Fred. 2001. *Whistleblowers: Broken Lives and Organizational Power*.

Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

Davis, G.F. and Thompson, T.A. 1994. A Social Movement perspective on Corporate Control. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 39, pp. 141-173.

Derrida, Jacques. 1977. *Politics of Friendship*. London: Verso.

Ewing, David W. 1977. *Freedom Inside the Organization*. New York: McGraw-Hill.

Gadamer, Hans-Georg. 1989. *Truth and Method*. New York: Crossroad.

Gauthier, David. 1986. *Morals By Agreement*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Hirschman, Albert O. 1970. *Exit, Voice, and Loyalty*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Kelly, Marjorie. 2001. *The Divine Right of Capital*. San Francisco:

Barrett-Koehler.

Nielsen, Richard P. 1996. *The Politics of Ethics: Methods for Acting, Learning, and Sometimes Fighting, With Others In Addressing Ethics Problems in Organizational Life*. New York: Oxford University Press.

- Nielsen, Richard P. 1998. "Can Ethical Character Be Stimulated and Enabled?" *Business Ethics Quarterly*, 8, 3, July, pp. 581-604.
- Nielsen, Richard P. 1993. "Woolman's 'I Am We' Triple-Loop, Action-Learning: Origin and Application in Organization Ethics," *Journal of Applied Behavioral Science*, 29, 1, March, 1993, pp. 117-138.
- Nielsen, Richard P. 2000a. "The Politics of Long-Term Corruption Reform: A Combined Social Movement and Action-Learning Approach," *Business Ethics Quarterly*, 10, 1, pp. 305-317.
- Nielsen, Richard P. 1989. "Negotiating As An Ethics Action (Praxis) Strategy," *Journal of Business Ethics*, 8, pp. 383-390.
- Nielsen, Richard P. 1990. "Dialogic Leadership As Organizational Ethics Action (Praxis) Method," *Journal of Business Ethics*, 9, pp. 765-783.
- Nielsen, Richard P. 2000b. "Do Internal Due Process Systems Permit Adequate Political and Moral Space for Ethics Voice, Praxis, and Community?" *Journal of Business Ethics*, 24, 1, pp. 1-27.
- Nielsen, Richard P. and Lee, Jennifer. 2003. *Reframing Organizational Ethics From Isolated Individual To Participative Citizenship Responsibility*. Working Paper, Boston College.