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Why Do We Remain Silent in the Face of  
Unethical Behavior

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## ***“Why Do We Remain Silent in the Face of Unethical Behavior?”***

### Synopsis

The author identifies fear, embarrassment, too narrow a conception of our ethical responsibilities, friends who are entangled in the corruption, organizational structures without political space for voice, and inadequate organizational ethics political as possible reasons for organizational silence.

### 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.

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### *Fear*

The fear obstacle is perhaps easiest to understand, not so easy to overcome. However, there are some methods that can help enable courage (Argyris, Putnam and Smith, 1985; Nielsen, 1998). Most of us do not like conflict. If we oppose unethical behavior, the powerful people engaging in unethical behavior may retaliate against us. We should be afraid. The preponderance of evidence demonstrates that public whistle blowers are effectively retaliated against in their organizational lives with often devastating consequences in the private and family lives (Alford, 2001)..

### *Embarrassment*

The embarrassment obstacle is more subtle. Many of us are reluctant to talk about messy topics such as sex, money, politics, and ethics because we feel that we may not be able to adequately and/or professionally express our concerns

### *Narrow conceptions of ethical responsibility*

Many define ethical responsibility in a very narrow, individualistic rather than in an organizational citizenship sense. We assume that if we personally understand what is ethical and do not act unethically ourselves, then we are ethical even if around us, unethical behavior prevails. If we act ethically in our individual organizational work boxes we are not obligated to see, hear, or speak about the unethical behaviors around us. As Edmund Burke observed, “When bad men combine, the good must associate; else they will fall one by one, an unpitied sacrifice in a contemptible struggle.” Organizational ethics education and research as reflected in journal articles and textbooks reinforce this too narrow framework. For the most part, the textbooks and journal articles end when the individual understands and/or makes a personal, individualistic decision about what is ethical (Nielsen and Leigh, 2003). That is a good part of the beginning, but certainly not the end of the problem.

### *Implicated Friends*

Sometimes, our friends being involved in the unethical behavior is just as important an obstacle as more powerful people being involved (Derrida, 1997). While we may fear the powerful, we naturally want to help and not hurt our friends. We can risk those friendships when we inquire, question, and/or challenge the behavior of friends on ethical grounds. While the old saying about “opposing the sin but not the sinner” sounds good, it is very difficult to operationalize.

### *Lack of opportunity for "voice"*

Macro level, structural characteristics of organizations often do not permit political space for voice. Where there is no safe, political space for voice, silence can result. Where can we discuss organizational ethics issues? Most organizations are not democracies. Even when organizations encourage participative management and decision making, the participation is tightly focused and controlled from the top. For example, upper level management can encourage participation about how to more efficiently accomplish top management's objectives. The agenda is often not very open to participative formulation. In addition, relatively few organizations have participative or democratic assemblies or congresses where organizational employees, members and other stakeholders are able to both formulate agendas and participate in making decisions on important issues including ethical issues (Ewing, 1977; Kelley, 2001).

### *Lack of organizational political skills*

Many of us do not understand or have the political skills useful for organizational ethics effectiveness. There are at least five sets of methods that can be both effective and relatively safe: forcing methods, win-win methods, dialogic methods, third-party methods, and social movement methods (Nielsen, 1996;2000a). While the dialogic methods are theoretically better, often the political-economic reality is such that the powerful people involved in the unethical behavior are unwilling and even unable to engage in dialog about unethical and corrupt behaviors. Further, they have the power to choose not to discuss the issues.

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