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Whistle Blowers in the Federal Civil Service: New Evidence of the Public Service Ethic

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Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory, Volume 8, Issue 3, 1 July 1998, Pages 413–440, <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordjournals.jpart.a024390>

Published: 01 July 1998

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Abstract

There is a strong undercurrent in the literature of public administration that suggests the existence—and importance—of service-related motives linked

to the public interest. Publicservice motivation (PSM) is a fledgling theory that predicts that many individuals predisposed to public norms and emotions act in the public interest, even when doing so runs counter to their selfinterest. This study represents the first attempt to link public service motivation to prosocial behaviors. Specifically, we draw a conceptual linkage between PSM and whistle blowing and we test hypotheses derived from these concepts with archival data collected by the U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board. Our findings reveal that federal whistle blowers act in ways that are consistent with the theory of PSM. That is, they are motivated by concern for the public interest, they are high performers, and they report high levels of achievement, job commitment, and job satisfaction. Moreover, federal whistle blowers are likely to work in high performing work groups and organizations. Overall, this study provides strong empirical support for the nascent theory of PSM.

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