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Speak Up Or Forever hold your Peace...



Anke de Groot - Thesis

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Supervisor: Kim Loyens

Second Assessor: Ozan Alakavuklar

Transparency International Nederland

Preface

Never would I have thought to conduct research regarding a topic which is difficult to clearly define and see. I have always been a more practical person for whom emotions, feelings and behaviors could not easily fit into an academic study. During this masters study I learned how a ‘‘good study’’ could also look like and about all the options that can be considered to incorporate into such a study. I found more creative ways to get to the answers I was looking for and I found out which ways fitted me. Academical research should, in my opinion, be accessible to everyone. Therefore I hope to have delivered a study that is open and accessible for those who are interested.

This research has been done during my time as an intern at Transparency International Nederland (TI-NL). I was assigned to Whistleblower protection and worked on a project to create a new report on the Whistleblowing Frameworks for 2024. Furthermore, I was involved in several projects and attending as well as organizing meetings which gave me more practical insights into how organizations work in relation to integrity and transparency. I helped organize Business Integrity Forum meetings and I went to the National Day of Detection. TI-NL welcomed me with open arms. I would like to thank the organization for having me and including me in their interesting activities. A special word of thanks to my supervisor Kim Loyens, who encouraged me, gave me new insights into her expertise as well as constructive feedback. Finally I would like to thank the company where I carried out the fieldwork and the openness with which I was received.

Writing a thesis was not the easiest or most relaxing thing I have ever done. Fieldwork, getting to know people and working with others got me energized. However, searching literature, hours in front of my screen, writing and rewriting was sometimes a bit of a struggle and it felt it happened at a slow pace. My roommate wrote a poem about the process of writing a thesis. See below a part of this poem that I would like to cite:

*‘‘Schrappen en herschrijven, woord voor woord, zin voor zin.
Na uren net vijf nieuwe regels, maar alles van vorige week weer de prullenbak in.
Nog nooit ging tijd zo snel, wijzers voortgejaagd, leven zichtbaar door de ruit.
Nog nooit deed ik zo weinig, tuurde slechts te midden van een wirwar aan gedachten voor mij uit.’’*

Translation:

*‘‘Editing and rewriting, word by word, line by line.
After hours, just five new lines and everything from last week thrown into the trash.
Never has time passed so swiftly, the clock’s hands chased forward, life visible through the window. And never have I done so little, only gazing amidst a tangle of thoughts before me.’’*

Luckily, the subject of a speak-up culture and the findings of this study helped me in staying interested and being determined to find out more. This case study shows what a speak-up culture looks like in a representative private company and how a whistleblowing framework can enhance this.

Enjoy reading and please speak up to me if you have any thoughts on this!

Abstract

This ethnographic one case study describes the perceived speak-up culture in a private company. This research studies the concept of speak-up culture in a corporate environment, specifically within a financial company in the Netherlands. It explores the relationship between ethical climate, ethical leadership and speak-up culture and how employees perceive this culture. Furthermore, this study describes the influence of a whistleblowing framework on the speak-up culture and the role of this framework in enhancing the speak-up culture. Through qualitative methods such as interviews and observations, this research aims to bridge the gap between theoretical concepts of speak-up culture and practical implementation. This study offers insights to improve internal whistleblowing mechanisms, ethical climate, ethical leadership and ultimately, the speak-up culture. Findings show that in the corporation that is researched, the perceived speak-up culture is influenced by factors such as psychological safety (Edmondson, 2018), fear, trust, social risks, and power dynamics (Cunha et al., 2018). Employees experience mixed levels of psychological safety, with interpersonal trust among peers but fear of feedback and criticism from superiors. Additional influences include cultural differences, individual traits and societal changes. To enhance the speak-up culture, the whistleblowing framework should involve genuine, visible commitment from top management and effective formal communication that includes employee input from all levels. This would ensure that actions are perceived as genuine and encourage a more open and responsive environment.

Key words: speak-up culture, psychological safety, ethnographic case study, whistleblowing, ethical climate, ethical leadership

Table of Contents

Preface.....	1
Abstract	2
1. Introduction	5
1.1 Problem Description.....	7
1.2 Objectives and research question	9
1.3 Scientific and Societal Relevance	11
1.4 Readers' Guide	13
2. Conceptual Framework	14
2.1 Speak-up Culture.....	14
2.1.1 Definitions	14
2.1.2 Power dynamics and speaking up.....	19
2.2 Ethical Climate	20
2.3 Ethical Leadership.....	23
2.4 The role of a whistleblowing framework	24
2.5 Visual relations conceptual framework	27
3. Methodology	29
3.1 Research Positioning	29
3.2 Research Design and Data Collection	30
3.2.1 Document analysis.....	30
3.2.2 Interviews	31
3.2.3 Observations.....	33
3.3 Data analysis.....	35
3.4 Coding	35
3.5 Quality of the study	37
3.6 Reflexivity.....	38
3.7 Ethics	40
4. Results and Analysis	41
4.1 The multifaceted perceptions of the Speak-up Culture	41
4.1.1 Psychological Safety.....	41
4.1.2 Fear	45
4.1.3 Trust.....	47
4.1.4 Taking social risks	48
4.1.5 Power relations	50

4.2	The importance of culture and leaders in the Ethical Climate	53
4.2.1	Corporate Culture	53
4.2.2	Perceptions of ‘good’ and ‘bad’	55
4.2.2	Company as moral actor	58
4.2.4	Ethical leadership	59
4.3	Relationship ethical climate, ethical leadership and speak-up culture.....	61
4.4	Tone at the top from a Whistleblowing Framework perspective	62
4.4.1	Commitment from the top	63
4.4.2	Formal communication company	64
4.4.3	How can commitment from the top and formal communication from the company enhance the speak-up culture?.....	65
5.	Discussion	68
6	Conclusion.....	73
7	Recommendations	77
	References	80
	Attachments.....	86
1.	Engaged fieldwork report at TI-NL.....	86
2.	Topic list.....	87
3.	How to Create a Safe Space Toolkit	88
4.	Informed Consent form	89
5.	Set-up Semi structured Interview	91
6.	Color Practice.....	93
7.	Results Color Practice Poster	94
8.	Speak-up Game	95

1. Introduction

I vividly recall the moment when the scandal surrounding The Voice of Holland unfolded before our eyes. It was a big revelation when the YouTube channel BOOS courageously brought to light the abuse of power by influential men within the program's organization who harassed women sexually (BOOS, 2022). On January 20th, 2022, the long awaited episode was released. As my roommates and I settled in to watch, the episode began with trigger warnings, setting the tone for what would come. Holding our breath, we watched the whole episode at once. The interview with John de Mol, the television producer behind The Voice of Holland, left us, along with countless others, angry and filled up with disbelief. What surprised a lot of people was the fact that de Mol explained the abuse of power was due to the fact that women didn't speak-up. Why did these women not report anything, why did they keep going on in silence? These were the questions from John de Mol. The problem was, these were the wrong questions. De Mol held the women responsible for not reporting the wrongdoing. The women who participated in the talent show and were dependent on the men with power who abused them. The burden was placed by the individuals who were subject to the abuse. The problem was not the assertiveness of the women, but the toxic culture of the company that top-management is responsible for. A good culture should be one in which it is encouraged to speak up and people feel safe to say what they want. John de Mol emphasized that 'his door was always open', but what if fear keeps everyone from walking through that door?

In essence, the scandal that rocked The Voice of Holland was not merely a failure of individual courage, but a failure of leadership and organizational culture. A failure that demands change at the highest levels.

'Rat, snitch or tattle'' are labels associated with whistleblowers, people who dare to speak-up (Dungan et al., 2015). They show how whistleblowing involves personal risks, and the importance of whistleblower protection. Research in the health care sector in the Netherlands (Van Der Velden et al., 2018) shows that in this sector 80% of the whistleblowers are confronted with negative consequences for work and income after having reported wrongdoing (De Kluis, 2018). Since the European directive (Directive - 2019/1937 - EN - Eu Whistleblowing Directive - EUR-Lex, 2023) entered into force, attention for whistleblowing (protection) and speaking up has increased in the EU. Employees are increasingly seen as an

important source for the detection of corruption, misbehavior and other wrongdoing.

Moreover, whistleblower reports can prevent legal liabilities, financial losses and reputational damage. Internal whistleblower protection in organizations which entail good whistleblowing frameworks are an important facet of a positive speak-up culture in an organization. A speak-up culture can enhance continuous improvement and fosters a corporate culture of trust and responsiveness. It also has the potential to strengthen the organization's credibility, reputation and morale (Transparency International Nederland, 2024).

In Whistleblowing Frameworks (2019), Transparency International Nederland (TI-NL) assessed the effectiveness of companies' whistleblowing frameworks which they define as:

“A framework of policies and procedures that proactively encourage employees – as well as third parties such as contractors, suppliers, service providers and customers – to raise concerns internally about potential misconduct. The mechanisms should protect those raising such concerns from retaliation and guide and organization's timely response to prevent or mitigate any harm to the public and/or to itself” (Transparency International Nederland, 2019; p.9)

This study focused on three aspects:

1. The level of protection given to people reporting wrongdoing internally
2. The effectiveness of the internal reporting procedure
3. The supportiveness of the corporate culture for the reporting of wrongdoing

The findings show that with an average score of only 31%, companies scored the lowest on the dimension of the corporate culture, which relates to the (lack of) safety employees perceive to speak up and report wrongdoing. Hence, there seems to be room for improvement on the dimension of culture. Specifically: a speak-up culture. This speak-up culture is a crucial aspect in finding out if companies are supporting the reporting of wrongdoing within their organization. One of the aspects of culture that cannot be found in rules and procedures is a speak-up culture. An open speak-up culture can lead to many advantages for companies. Room for open discussion can help improve the performance of the company. Furthermore, without an open internal structure for employees to report wrongdoing they might report externally. External reporting entails for example reporting to media channels, which can create negative publicity for companies.

Transparency International Nederland (TI NL) is an NGO that aims for a corruption-free society, focusing on improving integrity, transparency, and accountability across government, politics, business, civil society, and among citizens (Transparency International Nederland, 2018). Working at TI NL, I got to know different companies that are part of the Business Integrity Forum, the BIF. These private companies are partners of TI NL that exchange ideas and get information from TI NL to help with their integrity and transparency in their organization. In order to study the speak-up culture in depth, I conducted research at one private company. The specific private company in this one-case study is part of the financial sector. This company can be seen as a representative company for other private companies in the Netherlands that have to comply the new whistleblower protection law. The goal of this research is to analyze how employees in this private company perceive the speak-up culture.

1.1 Problem Description

External whistleblowing, reporting wrongdoing outside of the corporation, can in short term lead to negative effects for the organization. Reporting wrongdoing publicly can lead to (short-term) reputational damage for the organization. Internal whistleblowing, reporting within the organization, on the other hand leads to positive effects for the organization. This can lead to enhancing ethical behavior within the organization, more engagement of employees and the detection of fraud (Mrowiec, 2022). Most fraud and corruption in companies is found by employees who report wrongdoing; they are whistleblowers. Therefore, whistleblowing is one of the most important tools to uncover wrongdoing in organizations (Oelrich, 2019). Enhancing internal whistleblowing means enhancing the whistleblowing protection in the corporation. The level of protection can be found in the whistleblowing frameworks of an organization. All the different rules, procedures and values surrounding the reporting of wrongdoing constitute such a framework. A whistleblowing framework is important for employees to feel protected when reporting wrongdoing. Employees feel more encouraged to speak up when the whistleblowing frameworks of an organization are effective (Brown et al., 2019). A speak-up culture is an important part of the whistleblowing framework and can be affected by the ethical climate of an organization.

The whistleblowing frameworks can be divided into three dimensions (TI-NL, 2019), one of these dimensions is culture. Culture is a broad concept, difficult to define with all its different layers and contexts. An important aspect of culture is that it can be defined through behavior and simultaneously shapes and influences behavior (Spencer-Oatey, 2012). One of the oldest and most shared perceptions of culture in an organization is that of a shared set of norms and values (Guiso et al., 2015). A culture based on values of people in an organization, in this case a feeling of comfort and safety to speak up, is difficult to fully measure solely with quantitative data. Quantitative research explains how often things happen followed by calculations and diagrams to get a numerical overview of a situation. In contrast, qualitative research is all about stories and perceptions of people (Gelo et al., 2008). To find out more about the speak-up culture, an in-depth qualitative case study can help to get explanations from people, the role power dynamics play within the organization could be observed and unraveled during the interviews. The interviews also help in looking at the role of a corporate context surrounding this aspect of the whistleblowing framework. The corporate context is a context different from a public context where the goals of the organizations differ and the laws that these organizations must abide to also differ. In the case of this study where a financial corporation is subject of the research, there are many laws involved that influence how the organization works. Knowledge about how the speak-up culture is perceived in this context is scarce, due to the ethnographic nature of this study, this research provides a deeper understanding of the corporate context.

This study can bridge gaps between the speak-up culture in theory and in practice in the corporate atmosphere. Based on research conducted over the past few decades, we see that the public sector has consistently reported a higher percentage of wrongdoing compared to the private sector. According to an analysis, done a decade ago, of 30 major articles in leading newspapers over seven years, 70% of whistleblowing incidents were observed in the public sector (Cho & Song, 2015). This shows that there is still much to learn about the private sector. Several theories and frameworks have been constructed surrounding whistleblowing and a speak-up culture.

Furthermore, there is a need for more recent knowledge on the concept of speak-up culture. Theories from the past about speak-up culture show how norms and values in the past differed from now. Speaking up was for example seen as a form of extra positive work, but not necessary as a job requirement (Dyne & LePine, 1998). However, in this time speaking up

and concepts that enhance a speak-up culture such as psychological safety and an ethical climate are perceived as an integral part of the job (Edmondson, 2018). Norms and values change over time, this becomes clear when studying the theories about speak-up culture. It is important to keep studying how speak-up culture is perceived, what norms and values shape the perceptions of this culture and how other concepts influence this culture. This way we learn more about how this culture can be enhanced and how scandals, such as the Voice of Holland case, can be avoided. This ethnographic study gives a deeper insight into how a speak-up culture is perceived today in a corporate environment.

1.2 Objectives and research question

The aim of this study is to provide an understanding of the speak-up culture in a specific corporate context, hence the research question:

What is the perceived speak-up culture in corporation X and how can a whistleblowing framework enhance this?

The research question entails the notion of the *perceived* condition, this means that the perceptions of these employees are central to this study. The aim of this study is to describe experienced social realities of the employees (Boeije & Bleijenbergh, 2019). It uses a qualitative approach based on interviews and observations. The interpretative scientific approach is central.

Different sub-questions provide parts of the information necessary to answer the central question. The first sub-questions are answered in the conceptual framework of this study:

Conceptual sub-questions:

- *What is a speak-up culture?*

It is important to understand the concept of a speak-up culture for establishing a baseline for this research.

- *What is an ethical climate and how does it relate to a speak-up culture?*

An ethical climate is a crucial concept that influences speak-up culture. To understand the broader context of the culture in which employees operate, it is important to understand the ethical climate and how this influences the speak-up culture. This relationship shows how ethical considerations influence the perceptions of employees.

- *What is ethical leadership and how does it relate to a speak-up culture?*

Ethical leadership is an important concept to take into account when studying a speak-up culture. Ethical leadership shows visual and practical examples of what the ethical climate looks like and how leaders in the company promote and establish a speak-up culture

- *What is the role of a whistleblowing framework in relation to a speak-up culture?*

The role of a whistleblowing framework reveals how formal structures can influence the perceived speak-up culture. This knowledge is key to understanding the impact of a whistleblowing framework in corporation X.

When the concepts and relationships between the central concepts are described, the empirical questions are answered:

Empirical sub-questions:

- *How do employees perceive the speak-up culture in company X?*

Gathering the perceptions of employees gives a direct insight into the current perceived speak-up culture in the company. Understanding these perceptions is crucial for answering the central question.

- *How do employees perceive the ethical climate in company X?*

Employees' perceptions of the ethical climate helps in providing an overview of the ethical considerations in the company. What are the main values and what does an ethical leader look like according to employees.

- *What is the relation between the ethical climate and the speak-up culture in corporation X?*

Analyzing the relationship between these two concepts reveals how the ethical considerations of employees influence the perceived speak-up culture.

- *Which parts of the cultural dimension of the whistleblowing framework can be seen in relation to the perceived speak-up culture?*

In order to answer the last part of the central question it is crucial to identify the elements of the whistleblowing framework that influence the speak-up culture.

- *How can the whistleblowing framework in company X enhance the speak-up culture?*

This sub-question answers the last part of the central question. Understanding how a whistleblowing framework can improve the speak-up culture gives practical recommendations to improve the speak-up culture.

1.3 Scientific and Societal Relevance

This study provides new information on what is happening in practice when studying a speak-up culture. There still is a gap in knowledge between theories about speak-up culture and what happened in practice. For example, Vandekerckhove and colleagues (2018) write about speak-up arrangements that can help in providing a better speak-up culture. They underline the importance of trust between employees and top management. This theory can be studied in practice by for example conducting interviews with employees and determining what this trust looks like for them in practice. Another study from Mrowiec (2022) focuses on all the existing literature on factors that influence internal whistleblowing. They studied existing research from the public and private sector. However, this study does acknowledge the difficulties of studying these factors when the climate surrounding the subject changes rapidly. Therefore it is necessary to keep researching these factors, involving an ethical climate and the speak-up culture. Thus, there are relevant studies and theories about speak-up culture, but there is a need to overcome the gap between these theories and what is happening in practice.

This study will provide a new insight into the central concepts of speak-up, ethical climate and whistleblowing frameworks concerning a private organization operating in times where a new whistleblowing law has been implemented by the Dutch government. In their empirical study into culture related to whistleblowing with managers from Croatia and the US, Tavakoli et al. (2003) underline the limitations of the use of surveys in researching behaviors and social processes. To understand more about these behaviors this study will make use of a qualitative approach.

Corruption and wrongdoing in corporations can have a big influence on society. For example when looking at the Voice of Holland casus, Dutch society reacted massively (BOOS, 2022). The program, which had always been one of the most popular programs of the country, has been banned from TV. People were shocked about the misbehaviors and others were angry at the reaction of John de Mol. Due to the poor internal speak-up culture in the tv-production company this case built itself up. More abuse of power occurred and when it was already too late for the company to do anything about it, the word got out externally and the bomb exploded. This study is about the structure and culture of a company internally. As internal whistleblowing is one of the most important tools for organizations to uncover wrongdoings it is crucial to have a culture that encourages employees to speak-up (Oelrich, 2019). This way publicity bombs can be avoided so that corruption and wrongdoing can be dealt with at an earlier stage. Knowing what factors shape the behavior of (potential) whistleblowers can help to form new strategies and guidelines in organizations to enhance the speak-up culture. This one case study can inform other corporations about factors that are important when developing their own whistleblowing frameworks and the speak-up culture. The findings of this qualitative one case study can be evaluated and added to the existing theories about speak-up culture in corporate companies. The outcome contributes to the existing knowledge of speak-up culture and internal whistleblowing frameworks in corporate organizations. By taking a closer look into a specific context this research offers new insights for the speak-up theories and practices in a corporate context. This can help avoiding big scandals where corruption or other wrongdoing has gone too far with a negative effect on society.

Finally, the outcomes of this research aim to support the company where the study was conducted and other organizations that can use this example in order to enhance their own speak-up culture. With this information the company can learn more about what their culture looks like and yields new information from the perspective of someone outside of the

organization. The organization gets a deeper insight into what plays at different levels within the organization. The observations from an outsider can be useful in getting familiar with different perspectives and to potentially see new things.

1.4 Readers' Guide

In order to conduct this research, the concept of a speak-up culture needs to be defined and theorized. To define this concept theories about the speak-up culture in organizations are used. Furthermore the concepts of an ethical climate and the whistleblowing framework in relation to a speak-up culture are conceptualized. After this, the fieldwork focusses on the empirical information to answer the central question. The methodology of this research entails a qualitative one-case study with ethnographical research containing document-analysis, interviews and observations. At the end of this study the discussion describes scientific implications, the research question will be answered in the conclusion and practical recommendations are given.

2. Conceptual Framework

Before diving deeper into important theoretical concepts, first the definition of the concept of whistleblowing used in this research is given. Although whistleblowing has been defined in different ways by different sources (e.g. media, academic papers, policy documents) (Near & Miceli, 2016), this study uses the most often cited academic definition. Whistleblowing will be defined as:

“The disclosure by organization members (former or current) of illegal, immoral, or illegitimate practices under the control of their employers, to persons or organizations that may be able to effect action” (Near & Miceli, 1985, p.4).

Different studies into whistleblowing rules and procedures have been done (Tavakoli et al. 2003; TI-NL, 2019). What cannot be found in a set of rules and procedures is the ‘Speak-up culture’ which has to do with the feelings and experiences of employees and how safe and confident they feel in taking risks and showing vulnerability by reporting wrongdoing. In this qualitative research the speak-up culture is the central concept and it will be conceptualized first and is the central concept of this study. The speak-up culture can be influenced by other contextual concepts. In this study the contextual concepts taken into consideration are the ethical climate, ethical leadership and the whistleblowing framework. After the conceptualization of the ethical climate and ethical leadership in relation to the speak-up culture in the first section of this chapter, there will be a section in which the whistleblowing framework and the cultural dimension of this framework are explained in relation to the speak-up culture.

2.1 Speak-up Culture

2.1.1 Definitions

One important part of a culture in which employees feel safe to report wrongdoing is the ‘speak-up culture’. Speak up has been defined in different studies and is related to several other concepts, such as employee voice which is about employees sharing their concerns (Cunha et al., 2018). In earlier theories on speak-up culture, various norms and values were associated with speaking up. Van Dyne and LePine (1998) described how employees who voice their concerns engage in extra-role behavior. Extra-role behavior describes positive behavior that is additional to the essential job. This is the opposite of in-role behavior, which refers to

the essential tasks required for an employee's job. In-role behavior forms the foundation of an employee's regular performance. In contrast, extra-role behavior is about positive additional actions not formally specified in job descriptions, yet valued by supervisors for their contribution to the organization. Speaking up was considered extra-role behavior in this context. However, later theories on employer voice described speaking up, voicing concerns, essential for employees (Hosseini & Sabokro, 2021). Speaking up is now embedded as an integral part of the job for every employee, instead of just an extra-role activity.

'Employee voice' is a concept related to speaking up. Employee voice is about employees sharing their thoughts, ideas, concerns, and opinions about work with the people who can make changes. This helps to make the organization or team work better (Yue et al., 2022). Speaking up can also entail employees speaking their minds just to pay attention to a subject, not necessarily to change something. In the definition of whistleblowing used in this study the subject of reporting is always an illegal, immoral or illegitimate practice. For speaking up, this is different. The subject of speaking up can also be a new idea or feedback. A definition commonly used for speaking up is (Cunha et al., 2018):

'sharing one's ideas with someone with the perceived power to devote organizational attention or resources to the issue raised' (Detert and Burris, 2007; p.830)

In this study this definition for speaking up will be central. However, the definition misses other elements instead of only sharing ideas. More elements are used by Yue and colleagues (2022) for conceptualizing Employee voice. Other elements such as sharing thoughts and concerns make the definition more complete and fitting for this research in which employees of a company in the financial sector are the respondents. The definition used in this research for speaking up combines the definition of speaking up from Cunha and colleagues (2018) with elements from the definition of employee voice from Yue and colleagues (2022):

Employees sharing thoughts, ideas, concerns, and opinions about work with someone with the perceived power to devote attention or resources to what is shared

Here speaking up is related to whistleblowing in the sense that the ideas are shared with the goal of creating a follow up action, but not always to change something in the organization.

The person shares their thoughts with someone who is perceived by them to have power to do something with these thoughts. Speaking up comes with a risk. When an employee speaks up, they could be labelled as someone making trouble. They could lose respect, receive negative evaluations or worse (Detert & Trevino, 2010). When the speak-up culture is poor, fear of these risks is high. Speaking up at work is when employees go beyond their regular tasks to share their thoughts or raise concerns about how things are done. When employees speak up, managers are informed about problems in an early stage and can sometimes prevent more serious problems. However, if employees are discouraged from speaking up, leaders might not see the whole picture and could make mistakes that lead to bigger problems or crises in the organization (Yue et al., 2022).

In their whistleblowing frameworks research TI-NL (2019) describe a 'speak-up culture' as something that cannot be seen in numbers or specific procedures, but can be felt:

“Inclusive employers foster a “speak-up culture” by creating a psychologically safe workplace allowing for risks and vulnerability and promoting a culture where individuals can openly speak up without fear of retribution.” (p.39).

In this definition we see the necessity of a psychologically safe workplace. Different theories describe how employees feel more incentive to voice their concerns and ideas when they feel satisfied and emotionally committed to their work (Hosseini & Sabokro, 2021). Research shows that employees speak up more about ideas for improvement in the organization when they work in a psychologically safe environment (Detert & Burris, 2007). Psychological safety in the workplace refers to what and how people feel about potential outcomes of speaking up or taking social risks in the workplace:

“Psychological safety describes people’s perceptions of the consequences of taking interpersonal risks in a particular context such as a workplace.” (Edmondson & Lei, 2014; p.24)

In her initial research on psychological safety, Edmondson (1999) defined the concept within the context of teams. She described psychological safety as a shared belief among team members that they are safe to take interpersonal risks. One of the key actions that team members

can perceive as risky is speaking up. Edmondson describes psychological safety in the book: *The Fearless Organization* (2018) as:

“A belief that the context is safe for interpersonal risk taking – speaking up with ideas, questions, concerns, or mistakes will be welcomed and valued.”

In this book it is explained how fear does not work as a motivator for employees due to the fact that people cannot work optimally when they are afraid. Psychological safety on the other hand can enhance work ethics and there is no trade-off between psychological safety and a high demand from the company. Furthermore, in an article called: *The Competitive Imperative of Learning* Edmondson describes how the belief that efficient and consistent production ensures financial success is a myth. She argues for a psychologically safe environment where employees can make mistakes and learn from them (2014). In the image below the relation between performance standards and psychological safety according to this article is visualized:



Image 1; Edmonson (2014)

Research shows that when employees feel psychologically safe, they are more likely to speak-up. This safe environment encourages sharing knowledge and can help companies to operate at their best (Edmondson & Lei, 2014). Kwon et al. (2020) argue that in an environment where employees feel less worried about potential negative consequences of speaking up employees are more active on several aspects. These aspects include: seeking feedback, sharing information, experimenting, enhanced creativity and innovation.

In the case of this research, psychological safety is studied in the context of a corporate organization that makes use of hybrid working. Due to the upcoming popularity of hybrid working, research has been conducted into how psychological safety can be enhanced in a hybrid work environment. Many international corporations use hybrid working to organize themselves and also nationally it becomes more normalized. Hybrid working is also standard practice in the company where the fieldwork for this study was conducted. In order to create a psychologically safe environment in which employees are encouraged to speak-up, a study from Edmondson and Mortensen describes different steps on how managers can organize themselves (McCausland, 2023). The first step is encouraging the team to collaborate on finding innovative solutions to work more efficiently. The second step is directed towards the leader and says that leaders should openly discuss their own difficulties and limitations with remote and hybrid work. Thirdly, managers should start small with personal conversation to foster trust and welcome experience sharing from other team members. The fourth step entails sharing positive experiences and maintaining transparency within the team. Finally, the leader should always remember to look out for any comments or behaviors that could endanger the psychological safety and the speak-up culture.

A study conducted to establish what effective speak-up arrangements look like (Vandekerckhove et al., 2018) explains that employers need different channels to voice their concerns, that there needs to be trust between the persons concerned with the process and the whistleblower and that different nationalities and organizational cultures should be taken into account when making speak-up arrangements. These are examples of what arrangements could look like, these depend on what an organization might need. This is why it is important to study the perceived speak-up culture in an organization. Based on this study, fitting arrangements can be used as a tool to enhance the speak-up culture. Next to this an important factor in a speak-

up culture also entails listening. In relation to a speak-up culture, listening is crucial. Employees must feel heard and understood when they raise concerns or provide feedback. In many cases, the whole reason why they speak up is because they want to feel heard. The ability of managers to actively listen to their employees enhances an open speak-up culture. Listening ensures that the concerns and perspectives of the employees are taken into consideration. It shows that speaking up is taken seriously in the company. Therefore, listening is not only about hearing what is being said, but also about acknowledging, understanding, and responding appropriately to the input and ideas of employees (Speak-up expert, 2024).

2.1.2 Power dynamics and speaking up

There might also be potential barriers due to power dynamics for employees to speak up, because they are concerned about the response they get after speaking up. For example, not agreeing with managers is in many cases associated with disrespect. In these cases, there could be a context in which fear of speaking up exists (Cunha et al., 2018). This fear can be linked to the power dynamics that exist in the organization. In the example of Cunha et al. (2018) we see that managers, employees who operate mostly at top-levels of an organization, have a certain power surrounding them that prevents other employees from speaking up against them. Power dynamics can have an impact on the speak-up culture of an organization. Power has been defined in different ways, in this study power means the positional power that an employee holds within an organization.

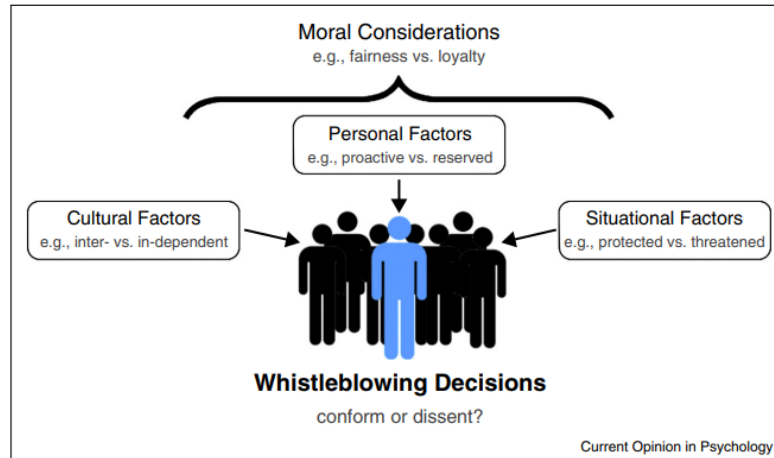
One theory that helps explaining the influence power dynamics have on the speak-up culture is the Social Dominance Orientation theory (SDO). In their study Islam & Zyphur (2005) show how the likelihood of individual employees engaging in speaking up about their opinions and ideas differs. This difference depends on their level of Social Dominance Orientation (SDO). People with a high SDO are more drawn to situations where there is a clear hierarchy. This study showed that people with a high position in an organization and a high SDO are more likely to speak up compared to people with lower positions and a high SDO. The SDO shows that the hierarchical social structures are accepted in the organization. This study additionally suggest that power position matters less for people who have a low SDO. Thus, the decision to speak up is less influenced by the power positions that are in place for people with a lower SDO. Another study related to positional power shows that when employees have a good

relationship with their leader, they are more likely to speak up. When the leader is perceived as trustworthy employees are more comfortable speaking up (Duan et al., 2019). In paragraph 2.3 from this chapter, theories about ethical leadership are described which further explain how employees perceive their leader. For organizations to improve their speak-up culture, good relationships between employees and leaders in the organization are crucial. Thus, power dynamics have a significant impact on the speak-up culture.

2.2 Ethical Climate

This part of the chapter conceptualizes and explains the importance of the ethical climate in relation to speak-up culture. Someone who speaks up has made different moral considerations before speaking up. These considerations can also withhold a person from reporting wrongdoings. In an article on the psychology of whistleblowing Dungan et al. (2015) distinguished different factors that influence these considerations. These are: personal -, cultural – and situational factors.

Figure 1



Factors influencing the decision of whether or not to blow the whistle, which are ultimately related to the trade-off between fairness and loyalty.

Image 2; Dungan et al. (2015)

This image shows how the three factors combined determine employees’ moral considerations. The cultural – and situational factors constitute the climate in which an employee operates. An ethical climate stimulates employees to speak up and act as a whistleblower. An ethical climate is an important concept that influences the speak-up culture in a company (Farooqi et al., 2017). This is why the ethical climate is an important concept to take into account when studying a

Speak-up culture. This study is about the ethical climate in a corporate context. Corporate culture entails the norms and values that determine the social control in an organization. The corporate culture influences the way in which employees behave in the organization. (Guise et al., 2015). Corporate codes of conduct or ethics are often used to create an ethical climate in which employees feel safe to speak-up (Pascoe & Welsh, 2011).

In a literature review on ethical climate by Mayer (2014), the first conceptualizations of ethical climate brought new theories about ethics into life. Victor and Cullen (1975) conceptualize ethical climate as: *‘‘The shared perception of what is correct behavior, and how ethical situations should be handled in an organization.’’* (p. 5). Whereas ethical norms and values were first seen as something that individuals determined, here ethical standards are described as a shared perception in an organization. There are different studies on the ethical climate of organizations (Treviño et al., 1998). One thing that theories on ethical climate describe is that the ethical climate of an organization shows the shared perceptions of what is considered as ‘‘good’’ and ‘‘bad’’ in an organization. An ethical climate tells how problems surrounding ethics can be dealt with and what is appropriate and what not (Teresi et al., 2019). Later on, Victor and Cullen changed their conceptualization of the ethical climate in:

‘‘The prevailing perceptions of typical organizational practices and procedures that have ethical content’’ (Victor and Cullen, 1988, p.101).

This is the definition of ethical climate that will be used in this study. This definition is more focused and fits this study, because it directly addresses existing practices and procedures in organizations with ethical context. These are easier to identify than the more abstract concept of ‘ethical situations’ which is used in the first definition. For this research it is important to focus on more specific measurements, such as practices and procedures, because it focuses on one organization. The definition for ethical climate used in this study makes the concept more tangible which is useful for the empirical part of this study.

The ethical climate entails the perceptions of right and wrong in the organizational environment. It is about what ethical behavior looks like and it influences the behavior of employees (DeConinck, 2011). Ethical behavior is about what is wrong and what is right, it is about when someone oversteps a line. An example of ethical behavior that is important for

this study is speaking up against wrongdoing. In their research Kaptein & Van Dalen (2000) show that there is a relation between the extent to which problems, criticism and dilemmas can be spoken about in the company, and the corporate ethics. The level in which problems are spoken about here is referred to as discuss-ability. The corporate ethical climate influences this level, an ethical climate in which the norm is to be open for feedback creates a higher level of discuss-ability. Discuss-ability as a concept fits with the concept of a speak-up culture which both entail the extent to which employees feel safe to discuss problems they perceive. Thus, the ethical climate of a company influences the speak-up culture. Ethics are an essential part of a speak-up culture. Whistleblowers report wrongdoing because of ethical considerations. When they do not dare to speak up due to considerations of punishment or fear of speaking up, this may be because of the company's ethical climate.

There are different factors from the ethical climate that can encourage or hold back someone to speak up: internal awareness, judgement, reasoning, silence rationalizations and emotions (Mrowiec, 2022). Internal awareness is about the consciousness of an employee concerning ethical issues. Low internal awareness can withhold speaking up due to ignorance of issues. Judgement concerns the fear of employees to be judged by other colleagues when speaking up. Reasoning is about the process of logically evaluating the consequences of speaking up, poor reasoning can result in not speaking up. Silence rationalizations entail considerations of employees not to speak-up due to the fact that they feel their input will not be of value. Certain emotions, such as fear or guilt, can also withhold an employee from speaking up. Understanding these factors helps in creating a supportive ethical climate that encourages speaking up by addressing and mitigating barriers while enhancing enablers. When the factors above concerning the ethical climate are conducted in an effective way, the speak-up culture in a company can be improved.

In a corporate culture, creating an ethical climate can be more difficult compared to other organizations. For example, there are certain negative stigma's surrounding ethics of corporate businesses. This is also caused by the pressure to make profit. Unethical behavior could be more tempting if it leads to higher performance rates (DeConinck, 2011).

2.3 Ethical Leadership

The ethical climate affects all levels in the organization from top management to ground level employees. Studies show that ethical leadership relates to ethical or unethical behavior in an organization (Mayer, 2014). Ethical leadership has been defined in different ways, Brown et al. (2005) describe ethical leaders as:

persons who set the example of appropriate behavior through personal actions and interactions.

This is the definition that will be used for an ethical leader in this study. This definition shows how the ethical leader has two roles: setting an example with their personal actions and making sure their employees act ethical by using interactions. With the interaction they have to encourage others to pursue open communication, support and inclusive decision-making. These three themes that constitute the example an ethical leader sets with personal actions and interactions: open communication, support and inclusive decision-making, can all be linked to a speak-up culture. Open communication in the form of always speaking up when something is happening. Communication is key in knowing what is going on and what is happening at an organization. This does not only involve communication from the employees to management about what is happening, but also about transparency and open communication from management to employees. The communication style of leaders significantly influences the behavior of employees in expressing their opinions (Yue et al., 2022).

Support is linked to a speak-up culture when an employee speaks up and they are supported instead of receiving backlash. This way an employee can be more secure about the consequences when speaking up. It is hard for people to speak up about problems at work when they know they might lose their job for doing so. Whistleblowers, or people who report wrongdoing, often worry about the negative consequences like getting fired, being forced to quit, losing their position, or being isolated by their colleagues. Because of these worries, it is likely that people put a lot of consideration about whether it's worth it to report a problem (Cho & Song, 2015). Thus, knowing the person who is in charge, the ethical leader, will not fire you when speaking up enhances a speak-up culture.

Finally, inclusive decision-making means that all employees get to have a say in organizational changes and get to speak-up about what is happening in the organization. Research shows that leaders, in many cases, act as a role model for their followers (Yue et al., 2022).

There have been different studies on what components of ethical leadership can look like. Examples entail: Ethical awareness, people orientation, motivating and empowering others and integrity. All these elements promote an ethical climate including the concern for wellbeing of others (Hartog, 2015). Ethical awareness means that the leader knows what the ethical standards in the company look like and acts according to it. People orientation entails the ways in which the leader includes feelings, wellbeing and emotions of the employees instead of only focusing on outputs and performance. Empowering and motivating others help in creating an ethical climate. Integrity includes the ethical awareness and means that the leader works fair and transparent. Ethical leadership can improve the ethical climate and with it the speak-up culture in an organization.

Furthermore, ethical leaders can improve the speak-up culture with a good whistleblowing framework in place. Commitment from the top and formal communication from the company are the two categories of a whistleblowing framework that are important for this study, because these both construct the cultural dimension of the whistleblowing framework. Commitment from the top is about the personal actions that ethical leaders take in order to improve the speak-up culture. Formal communication from the company is about the interactions of ethical leaders in the form of practices and procedures that enable a speak-up culture. In the next paragraph the whistleblowing framework and its role in relation to a speak-up culture is explained.

2.4 The role of a whistleblowing framework

Whistleblowers have been defined by different scholars in many different ways. Dungan et al. (2019) described whistleblowers as: *“people who report unethical behavior occurring within their own group to an authority”*. Research shows that most fraud and corruption is detected by employees, the whistleblowers. Whistleblowing is an effective way and often is essential in detecting wrongdoing in an organization (Oelrich, 2019). This study entails whistleblowing in the corporate context. Corporate fraud and other crimes are mostly detected through whistleblowing. Corporate codes of conduct can be established to improve the speak-up culture (Pascoe & Welsh, 2011). These ethical codes of conduct can differ per country depending on culture, but also on the laws. For this study, where a company that is based in the Netherlands is central, it is important to note that European laws can influence the context. In Europe, the new whistleblowing directive influences the corporate codes and ethics that have to be

implemented (Directive - 2019/1937 - EN - Eu Whistleblowing Directive - EUR-Lex, 2023). However, this directive is implemented differently in different countries.

For this study, the corporate organization has to implement the new law: The Whistleblower Protection Act that has been implemented on the 18th of February 2023 (Ministerie van Binnenlandse Zaken en Koninkrijksrelaties, 2023). This law makes an internal reporting procedure with reporting channels mandatory. These procedures should make clear where and to whom whistleblowers can report wrongdoings. Furthermore, the rights of a whistleblower should be clear and protected and the company should make clear what is going to happen with the report of the whistleblower.

To enable whistleblowing in a company an effective whistleblowing framework has to be in place. An effective whistleblowing framework consists of a set of different procedures, rules, norms and values. Different factors influence this framework, for example the level of independence of the risk committee in a company or the diversity of the board (Dungan et al., 2019). Erin and Bamigboye (2020) argue that there are different elements in a company that are considered important for an effective whistleblowing framework. For example, the audit committee size, the risk committee independence, the board composition and the institutional ownership of the company. In this study the cultural dimension, the factors that are related to the norms and values of a company are central. The whistleblowing frameworks are defined by Transparency International Nederland (2019) as:

“A framework of policies and procedures that proactively encourage employees – as well as third parties such as contractors, suppliers, service providers and customers – to raise concerns internally about potential misconduct. The mechanisms should protect those raising such concerns from retaliation and guide an organization’s timely response to prevent or mitigate any harm to the public and/or to itself”

In the Whistleblowing frameworks TI NL (2019) constructed the dimension of culture from different processes, policies and requirements that are known to enhance the company’s culture in collaboration with two accountancy firms and other experts (PWC, 2013). To measure the concept of culture in a quantitative study in whistleblowing frameworks the concept has been divided into two categories: Commitment from the top and Formal communication from the company.

Commitment from the top has to do with the professional commitment to whistleblower protection and speak-up culture of managers and seniors in companies.. Commitment from the top relates to the power dynamics described above. The distance in power between employees at lower levels and employees at the top level of an organization can influence the decision to speak up. Research shows that in the case of an Economics & Business faculty at Universitas Gadjah Mada (Indonesia), the higher the distance in power, the higher the barriers are towards the decision to speak up against wrongdoing (Pangestu & Rahajeng, 2020). This shows how important commitment from the top in a company is. Trust in managers is also an important factor for whistleblowing. Not only in whistleblowing, but the performance in a company also shows the importance of trust. In a company where employees trust their top managers and perceive them as ethical the performance is stronger (Guiso et al., 2015). Ethical leaders can show their commitment by their personal actions. They show their commitment in promoting and following certain practices that improve the speak-up culture. A style of managing called mushroom management, where information is not shared with employees, has been shown to have a negative impact on the internal whistleblowing (Mrowiec, 2022).

Formal communication from the company in the whistleblowing frameworks (TI-NL, 2019) encompasses all the ways in which the company promotes, communicates and gets feedback from employees if the company provides a psychologically safe space for employees to speak up. This can for example be during training, surveys and feedback moments from employees. A negative example of communication in whistleblowing frameworks is the mushroom management style described earlier. An open and respectful culture surrounding communication creates a higher satisfaction for employees which correlates positively with internal whistleblowing (Mrowiec, 2022). Ethical leaders can influence this formal communication with their interactions with employees. They can form and communicate procedures and practices to improve the speak-up culture.

Research conducted on how to stimulate reporting integrity violations has also shown how different procedures and policies can enhance this process. Heres et al. (2022) recommend the next practices for organizations in order to have a good internal reporting system:

1. Invest in the knowledge, competencies, skills, and attitudes of people who bear responsibility in integrity management.

2. Outline the expectations of stakeholders in reporting processes in a clear way. Adjust these expectations when necessary and actively monitor stakeholders' experiences during the reporting process.
3. Coordinate communication effectively among various stakeholders at the beginning of the reporting process.
4. Explicitly outline and utilize the learning potential of internal reports.
5. Investigate the extent to which the course of reporting processes is influenced by the nature of the integrity violations being reported.

These recommendations fit within a whistleblowing framework and also touch upon the commitment from the top in the first recommendation and communication in recommendation two, three and four. When these whistleblowing frameworks are in place and the policies and procedures are known to the employees, the threshold to speak up becomes lower. Managers who commit to an open reporting culture form an example for employees. Team leaders, by how they act or how they interact with employees, are very important in encouraging employees to speak up. (Duan et al., 2019). Next to this, communication policies help in creating a psychological safe environment (Heres et al., 2022) which is important in order to enhance the speak-up culture.

2.5 Visual relations conceptual framework

In order to give a more comprehensive overview of the relations between the concepts studied and described in this theoretical part of the study a visual conceptual framework is given.

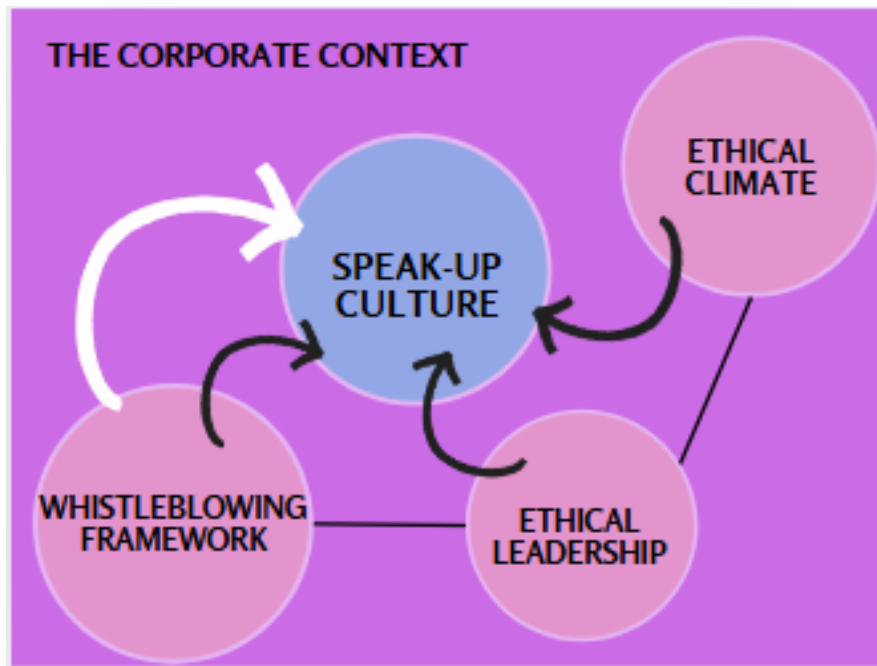


Image 3: Conceptual Framework

Here we see the ethical climate, ethical leadership and the whistleblowing framework of a company influencing the speak-up culture with the black arrows. The white arrow shows how in this study there is a secondary goal in researching which parts of the whistleblowing framework could enhance the speak-up culture in the company. The three concepts are also linked with each other. The ethical leader operates in an ethical climate and an effective whistleblowing framework in which a good speak-up culture is preached by practices and procedures is constructed and implemented by ethical leaders. All of this, is in the context of the corporate organization.

3. Methodology

In this section of the study the empirical part is laid out with the goal of answering the central question:

What is the perceived speak-up culture in corporation X and how can a whistleblowing framework enhance this?

First the research positioning of this study is explained. Then the research design and the different ways of data collection of this study are described. After this, the phase of data processing, operationalization and an explanation of how the data has been analyzed is given. Finally, this chapter describes the quality of this study, after which the reflexivity follows, which is a description of the position of myself as the researcher in relation to this study. This chapter ends with the ethics that have been held into account when conducting this study.

3.1 Research Positioning

This study is a qualitative study with the aim of understanding and describing social reality and what takes place within it (Boeije & Bleijenbergh, 2019). With the qualitative character of this study, where the conclusions are derived from interviews and observations, this study is inductive (Ladyman, 2002). The scientific philosophical approach that is applied in this research is the interpretative scientific philosophical approach. The interpretative scientific approach follows the belief that there is no objective social reality, but that it is formed by people's interpretations and perceptions (Risjord, 2014). This research focuses on the perceptions and acts of employees. The social reality that is studied is the reality of these employees. The aim here is to get a better understanding of how the employees perceive the speak-up culture in the workplace and what can be observed about how the company's whistleblowing frameworks influence the speak-up culture. It is not about social facts that are disconnected from the perceptions and meanings that the employees give to their reality. This can be seen as a form of 'Verstehen'. Verstehen is about understanding and describing the lived experiences and the lived social realities of the respondents that are studied (Durberry, Johnson & Cassell, 2012).

The advantage of qualitative research is that it can touch upon emotions. The participants that play a key role in this study, the employees, are given a voice from all levels of the corporation. This helps in bringing out marginalized perspectives. Qualitative methods also have the potential to capture a detailed narrative that a quantitative study could hardly ever capture. Next to this, there is space in a qualitative study to explore new information and themes that come up unexpectedly. The Whistleblowing Frameworks of TI NL (2019) did include questions and research surrounding the topic of a speak-up culture. Nonetheless, it is worth noting that measuring the cultural dimension using a quantitative approach can be difficult. It's possible that the actual protection granted to whistleblowers and the speak-up culture can differ in practice. This can be studied by talking to – and observing employees. In obtaining this knowledge an ethnographic fieldwork can give additional insights in the condition of the speak-up culture in an actual corporation.

3.2 Research Design and Data Collection

This ethnographic research employs an in-depth single case study into the speak-up culture in one company. An in-depth case study helps in telling everyday stories and lived experiences of people. Diving deeper into a case can assist in capturing the complexity of experiences that people live through and how they perceive these experiences (Simons, 2014). Various methods are employed including interviews, document analysis and observations. The use of different sources for data collection means that method triangulation has been used in this study (Boeije & Bleijenbergh, 2019; p.160).

3.2.1 Document analysis

Before starting the observations and the interviews this study contains a document analyses of existing reports and other documents. This is an important step in understanding the context of this study and to gain knowledge about the dimension of culture in whistleblowing frameworks and about speak-up culture. Different publications and documents surrounding the subject of whistleblowing and speak-up have been published and are relevant for this study. For example, the different Whistleblowing Frameworks rapports (TI-NL, 2019), the law on whistleblowing protection (Ministerie van Binnenlandse Zaken en Koninkrijksrelaties, 2021) and the current code of conduct from the company that is central to this study. Documents from existing studies are analyzed during the literature review in the conceptualization of the theory for this study.

Social realities that have already been found and described in this literature are investigated and a selection of suitable documents has been made (Boeije & Bleijenbergh, 2019; p. 80).

Other existing documents about speak-up rules and best practices (Vandekerckhove et al., 2018) have also been used during the data analysis of observations and interviews to find out if some of these can be found in the organization.

3.2.2 Interviews

There are different forms and types in which qualitative interviews can be conducted. This study entails semi-structured interviews in which a list of topics and questions derived from existing knowledge is the basis (Boeije & Bleijenbergh, 2019; p. 75). The topic list exists of different themes surrounding a speak-up culture, an ethical climate and the cultural dimension of the internal whistleblowing frameworks in a company. Next to this basis there is also room for improvisation during the interview when interesting new subjects come to light. All questions are open-ended. The interview set-up and the topic list can be found in attachment 5.

In this study a specific technique was used to conduct the interviews. This is an art-based method to conduct research which is called photovoice. In a study conducted by Lal et al. (2012) photovoice is described as a participatory action research method using photos. Using a method in which the participants already participate before the interview is conducted can help in obtaining more information about experiences and perceptions that are closer to the participants. Photographs can be used in different stages of the study. In this study the respondents of the interviews were asked beforehand to take pictures of places or objects in their workplace that they relate to a feeling of safety to speak-up or the opposite. This way the photos are taken from an ‘insider’ perspective (Lal et al., 2012). The respondents could tell more about these pictures during the interviews. By giving an assignment before the interview respondents already think about the subject before the interview, giving them more time to think about how to describe their experiences. This can lead to more and detailed information from the respondents and potentially new information outside of the topic list. One respondent showed for example pictures of doors that only opened for people with the label ‘relevant person’, which made this respondent think about speak-up in relation to power relations. Another respondent showed a place outside of the building where (s)he felt safe to talk about private matters with close colleagues. With this assignment the respondents were already

activated to think about the concept of speaking up and how they would describe it in their own way. This led to more knowledge during the interview which enhanced the conversation and gave me as a researcher the chance to dig deeper into the subject.

Participants

15 interviews varying from 45 minutes to an hour have been conducted during the data collection of this study. Due to the sensitive nature of the subject of this study, the participants will remain anonymous. The respondents were contacted by my contact person in the company or by me when meeting them during the observations. In some cases, employees heard of this research and contacted me to obtain an interview. We contacted employees from different levels and teams of the organization. Different roles in the company can entail different perceptions of a speak up culture. In the theoretical conceptualization we can see that research showed that the higher the distance in power between employees, the higher the barriers can be in deciding to report wrongdoings (Pangestu & Rahajeng, 2020).

The participants are mostly stationed at the headquarters of the financial company in the Netherlands and most of them are Dutch. However, three of the interviews have been held online with international employees of the company situated in headquarters in other countries, for example the United Kingdom. Due to the sensitivity of this topic the participants are kept anonymous. Apart from the international interviews, the interviews were conducted in person at the company location in the Netherlands in a private setting.

Next to the interviews with employees from the company that is central to this study, I also talked with different experts on the subject of a speak-up culture and whistleblowing. Two of them were from outside the organization and specialized in the subject of whistleblowing protection and speaking up. Another was a professional who works at the company of this study and is specialized in equity and inclusion. This respondent had also been working on the code of conduct for the company. The goal of these conversations is to find out as much about a speak-up culture as possible from the perspective of an expert on the subject. These insights are helpful for the theoretical part of this study, but also in analyzing the data with a broader vision. During the interviews and observations these insights gave me a better understanding of how to look at the data.

Operationalization

In the Whistleblowing frameworks TI-NL (2019) constructed the dimension of culture with different experts (PWC, 2013). This framework was used to conduct questions for the

quantitative survey, however there is a sidenote that the cultural dimension is hard to measure this way. That is because these questions are based on rules and procedures and these questions were structured with closed answers. The questions do not ask about experiences and emotions which are important in describing a culture.

In this study the themes and topics are derived from existing literature and research about the concepts that are central to answering the research questions. The existing literature has been studied in the conceptual framework. The topic list that was utilized in obtaining the interviews and observations can be found in attachment 2.

Three themes with subtopics have been constructed: Speak-up culture, Ethical climate and Whistleblowing Frameworks. Ethical leadership can be found as a subtopic under ethical climate, because this fits best with this theme. The subtopics within the theme of ethical climate collectively illustrate the norms and values of the organization and define what an ethical leader should advocate in the organization. The other subtopics from the main concepts of this study have been derived from the conceptual framework.

Furthermore, there was room for including new topics, themes and information during the data-gathering phase. The data-gathering was an open process in which all information was written down.

3.2.3 Observations

Conducting observations is one of the methods that fits in an ethnographic study. In this research participant observation is the method that was utilized. I visited the company on different times for over a period of three months and participated when activities like company drinks or walks outside during the break took place to actively engage and talk with employees. In order to gain knowledge, I listened, watched and engaged with a lot of different employees from the company (Bryman, 2012). After every day I spend at the company I went directly home and noted all interesting observations in a document. I wanted to participate in activities and in the usual work day of an employee at the company, this is why I did not want to take notes too obviously. During my time in the organization I took notes on my mobile phone to prevent myself from forgetting important observations. I, as the researcher, have spent a period

of time in this specific company context with people to find out more about the culture (Ybema et al, 2009). Engaging with the employees outside the interview setting helped in finding more about their social reality. Not only words, but also behavior and actions have revealed information about their perceptions and the speak-up culture. By doing observations in the organization, new information about the culture that was unknown to the organization was revealed. I found out more information during the lunch breaks, the walks outside, talking to the receptionists and getting some coffee then I assumed previously. Not only the people and the interactions with them, but also the building itself and how it looks like from the outside and inside helped me figure out more cultural aspects of the company.

During my observations I put on an A2 poster on the wall next to a central coffee corner with different actions in relation to the topic list and a speak-up culture. The assignment here was that the employees who saw the poster could put on stickers in different colors. I call it the coloring practice and experienced it myself during a course on creative interventions. When doing this practice I felt activated to think about the subject of study, which in this case was loneliness amongst elderly, and I also felt safe to give my true answers, because it was anonymous. This practice was of value to this study to get a perspective from a broad group of employees and from employees who would rather not be interviewed. In this way everyone who wanted to participate got the chance to do so and to think about the subject in their own privacy. The explanation of the color practice can be found in attachment 6.

Here respondents are asked to think about the subject actively without them having to talk to someone directly about it. Due to the sensitivity of the subject this might be a solution in getting to know more without directly talking with people. At first, I was scared no one would make a move to put stickers on the poster. I left the poster hanging on the wall for a period of three weeks and the poster got filled up more and more. Employees were also talking about the assignment at the coffee corner where it was put up.

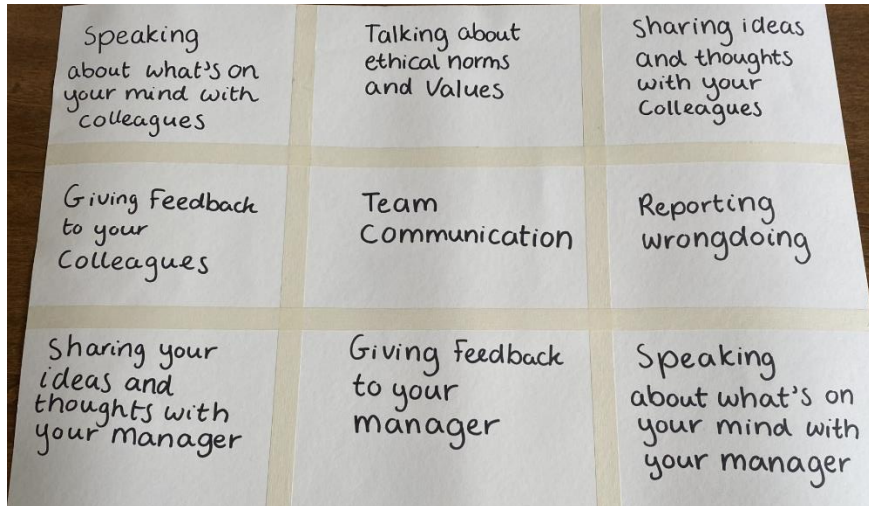


Image 4: Empty poster, Color Practice

3.3 Data analysis

For this research the data collection is interpreted in the results section. An inductive analysis method is used where data was gathered by interviews and observations. This data is analyzed afterwards (Boeije & Bleijenbergh, 2019). During the interviews and observations there was room for respondents own interpretations and probing questions about perceptions regarding the social realities of the respondents. There is also a deductive element in exploring research beforehand with existing literature and theories. In this part of the study existing studies and documents are analyzed to help sensitizing the concepts that are central in this research. From this document analysis, certain topics can already be formed and used for a part of the interviews and observations.

During the analysis the data was continuously compared to each other using constant comparison to analyze the data as openly as possible. This can entail changes in the existing codes and themes during the analysis (Boeije & Bleijenbergt, 2019).

3.4 Coding

The data from the interviews have been recorded and transcribed. All transcriptions have been put into a program to help with the coding process: Nvivo. Boeije & Bleijenbergh (2019) explain coding as arranging and categorizing the data from the research to help with the data analysis. There are different forms of coding. I used open coding and closed coding from my

conceptual framework at the beginning. In this chapter I already highlighted some important data and categorized themes which could be found in the data in accordance to the topic list that was made beforehand. After this I used axial coding to structure the broader themes into more specific codes and into new codes that could be found outside from the topic list. Selective coding was the last form of coding that I used to find relationships between codes, for example the relation between the ethical climate and the speak-up culture. The topic list was used for this selective coding process that is constructed by the existing literature.

During the coding process I found most of the data fitted with the topic list which I also used as themes and codes. Not all data fitted within these codes, which is why I obtained three new codes: Cultural Differences, Individual Personality and Other. 'Other' is the code used for some interesting data that was too important not to use, but also not relevant or not seen enough to make a separate code for. The two first codes were derived after transcribing the first two interviews in which I found the importance of these topics to the participants. The data about cultural differences and the individual personality or characteristics of the participants did not perfectly fit into one of the other codes from the already established topic list, which is why I decided to make them into separate new codes.

An example of making a new code is the code Cultural Differences. The image hereunder shows how this code was made, going from specific codes, to broader themes ending with the code Cultural differences.

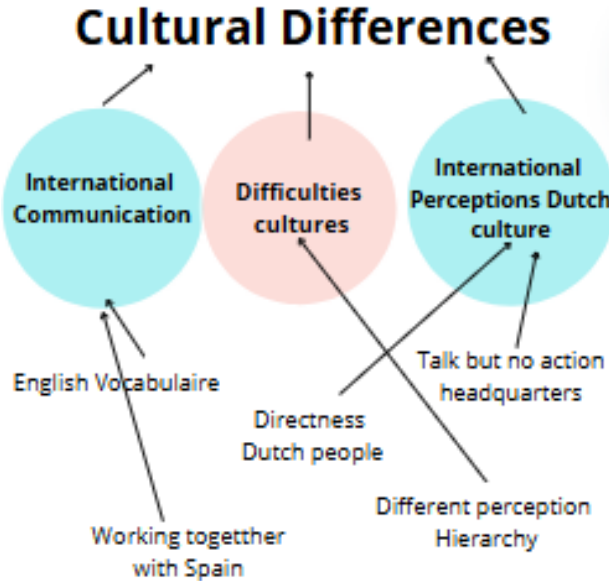


Image 5: Example coding

3.5 Quality of the study

To improve the quality of this study it is important to ensure the internal validity. Validity, in general, refers to observing what is intended to be observed (Boeije & Bleijenbergh, 2019, p. 155). Internal validity in research concerns the consistency of all parts of the study, ensuring that these components do not contradict each other. In qualitative research, internal validity is generally more often questioned than in quantitative research (Symon & Cassell, 2012). This is because qualitative researchers must make many more choices and consider numerous factors regarding quality criteria compared to quantitative researchers. These constant considerations lead to continual adjustments and comparisons of each part of the study, enhancing internal validity. Another important factor to keep in mind to improve the quality of this study is the reliability. A qualitative study is reliable when it meets the criterion of 'dependability' (Symon & Cassell, 2012). The researcher clearly shows what they have done, how the research was structured, what the planning was, and how the methodology was justified. This chapter, the methodology, shows this dependability.

Using 'Thick description' helps in providing a more reliable and valid study. Thick description is a way of describing the observations and data in detail and considering and describing contexts, meanings and motivations (Ponterotto, 2015). In describing the data using thick descriptions the data becomes richer. Furthermore, the validity is enhanced by providing a deeper insight into the context of the social realities of the participants and by describing all valuable contextual information without interpreting this already. Thick description can also help in understanding the emotions of participants in describing what someone looks like and how someone acts in a detailed way. This is important for this particular study in which the goal is to find out more about the perceptions related to the speak-up culture in the company which can be a sensitive and/or emotional subject.

Furthermore, it is important that this scientific research adheres to quality criteria for qualitative research. This ensures that the research and its outcomes are of good quality. One important criterion is credibility. It is important that the researcher finds a good match between the constructed realities of the subjects and the reconstructions attributed to them

(Symon & Cassell, 2012). Giving people the benefit of the doubt when not agreeing with someone and trying to always assume that what someone tells me as a researcher is meaningful in their own way is called the Principle of Charity (Risjord, 2014). This improves the credibility of a study. I used this principle to never perceive the statement of someone as irrational and interpret the views of the participants in the ways that they give meaning to their social realities. Having used this Principle of Charity ensured that this study came as close to the truth as possible concerning the lived social realities of the participants, which is the goal of this research.

Finally, when participants do not answer truly or change their answers during research there could be different reasons. When talking face-to-face with a researcher they could want to feel better of themselves or make themselves look better than they are for the researcher. This is called the Social Desirability Bias (SDB) (Larson, 2018). This bias stems from the idea that some answers are more preferable than others in a society. This SDB can be a problem for the credibility of this study when the data leads to be overly positive or untrue concerning the social context and behavior of people. In this study when talking about a speak-up culture which can be a sensitive subject there was a risk of the SDB coming up. In order to reduce this bias in this study the anonymity of the participants is maintained and the name of the company where the research took place will not be named. This way the respondents know the answers cannot be traced back to them personally in any way. In their research concerning the SDB in qualitative studies Bergen and Labonté (2020) also explain the importance of a safe and comfortable environment for the respondent to be interviewed. This environment includes a comfortable bond with the researcher that could be created through humor and respect. In this study I have strived to create this safe and comfortable environment together with the participants. For example, we talked about our day and how we felt before starting the interview and we got a cup of coffee or tea when the interview was in person beforehand. This created a safe and comfortable environment in order to conduct the interview in the best way possible.

3.6 Reflexivity

Being a researcher it is important to be aware of my identity and perceptions going into this study. During this study my internship at Transparency International Nederland is important to

keep in mind. Next to this study I also worked on a new Whistleblowing Frameworks report that could be of influence on my perspective obtaining and interpreting data during this study. Therefore, during this study I have constantly reflected on these potential perspectives and on the ways in which it could influence this study.

Due to the sensitive nature of this study, it is important to create a safe environment for the participants. I am no psychologist so talking with people about emotions is not something I have been studying to do in depth. I have gained some experience during my board year at a student association by taking courses and thinking about inclusion. Additionally, I have dived deeper into different studies on how to create a safe environment for participants. Last year I followed different courses in my masters in which we created workshops where I also gained some knowledge on how to do this. For example, for my data collection I used the We-Rise Toolkit on how to handle emotions of participants (See: Attachment 2) that I got to work with during one of these courses.

During this study and my fieldwork at TI NL I engaged with different people from different sectors. This was sometimes hard when my positionality got in the way of certain subjects we talked about. During my masters I learned a lot about inequalities that exist in the world. I learned that in a lot of cases my position and perceptions stem from a Western power position in regards to other places in the world. Sometimes it was hard to talk with big corporate organizations during events on how to become more transparent while in general I felt like there was a lot that could be improved on when it comes to how they operated from a more sustainable and equality perspective.

On the other hand, my identity as a master student at a well-known faculty at Utrecht University helped me in different ways. Firstly, it helped me in forming connections with different people who were all specialized in the field of Whistleblowing or Speak-up. From them I learned more about the field and I've received advice on what research could be important for the topic of this study. Secondly, it helped me in the way I was perceived by others who got to know of my study. The fact that I am a master student already experienced in doing research helped in this regard with the fact that I was taken seriously. This was important for finding the right participants who were willing to partake in this study.

3.7 Ethics

In the next section the ethical dimension of this study is considered. First the privacy and confidentiality of the participants is protected. Regarding the interviews there is an informed consent form that the participants had to sign before partaking in the interviews. This way the participants participated voluntarily and informed about the study. This enabled them to make a well-informed decision regarding their participation (Bryman, 2016). I have made clear to the participants that the interviews are on a voluntary basis and that they could always opt out. Secondly, personal information about the participants that is not relevant for interpreting the results and can be used to identify them, is and will be kept confidential. All data is stored on the hard drive of my personal secured laptop and in my personal Nvivo account.

In conducting observations, the protection of the participants can be more challenging when they are not always in the setting of being aware that they are analyzed. To make sure the employees know what to expect I communicated openly about this research and about my role as a researcher. I gave them the chance to back out of the study if they so desired. Thereby, during my time in the company I stayed in contact with the employees and repeatedly asked them if they were still interested in joining the research.

Finally, the privacy of the participants as an ethical consideration is important (Bryman, 2016) and will be maintained. In this study the participants are pseudonymized where the answers of the respondents cannot be linked to a participant.

4. Results and Analysis

This chapter shows the analysis of the data collection from this study and the results from this data. This section aims to find answers for the research question of this study:

What is the perceived speak-up culture in corporation X and how can a whistleblowing framework enhance this?

The structure of this chapter follows the structure of the empirical sub questions, which also follow the structure of the topic list. First the findings about the speak-up culture will be described, followed by the findings about the ethical climate, ethical leadership and how this relates to the speak-up culture. After this, the findings about the cultural dimension of the whistleblowing framework are explained. Important to note is that most of the data sources and quotes that can be found in this chapter have been translated from Dutch to English.

4.1 The multifaceted perceptions of the Speak-up Culture

This results chapter focusses on the concepts that contribute to - or influence a speak-up culture and describes how these aspects have been perceived by the employees in the company. The concepts are somewhat intertwined as there is an overlap in the psychological safety employees perceive with for example the level of trust they experience. There seem to be different aspects of the speak-up culture in company X that can be derived from the data. The aspects described entail the psychological safety, fear, trust, social risk taking and power relations. The following paragraphs answer the next question: *How do employees perceive the speak-up culture in company X?*

4.1.1 Psychological Safety

From the interviews and observations a mixed picture emerges of perceived psychological safety within the organization. In the interviews respondents talked about safety and openness in certain teams and under specific circumstances. In all situations it is clear that this feeling depended on the team respondents the were part of and under which circumstances a meeting took place. In most of these cases employees working in teams on the ground level talked about how they felt safe in their team or with certain colleagues within their team:

“Within our team we feel it is a safe space and we can say lots of in our own team so we might be a little bit cynical or we might be a bit critical of what else is happening around the organization but, that is our safe space to be able to do that I'm not sure we can be that vocal about it outside of our team.” (Respondent 12)

Here respondent 12 talks about how (s)he can say a lot of things, which might be a bit more critical or cynical, to his/her close colleagues, because (s)he feels like this is a safe space to do so. The data show a safety that employees feel within the bubble of their team, the people who they work with the most and whom they see and speak to the most. This perceived psychological safety between colleagues within teams is also underlined in the answers that have been given on the poster (See: Attachment 6 & 7).



All stickers on the activities that entail speaking about what’s on you mind with colleagues and about sharing ideas and thoughts with colleagues are red and green. This means the employees who filled in the poster perceive these actions as safe and trustworthy. For example, in the field: ‘Giving feedback to your colleagues’ there is a red/yellow balance, where red means employees feel safe to do this and the yellow stickers mean that some feel at risk when providing other colleagues with feedback.

Most managers felt safe talking with higher management. The differences of perceptions from different levels of the company will be further explained later in this chapter (paragraph 4.1.5 Power Relations). It is interesting that almost everyone was certain they would speak up about

wrongdoing in this organization, which seems to indicate that speaking up is inherent to the culture of the company (as will be discussed in the paragraph on ‘Corporate Culture’, 4.2.1). However, it could also be an example of social desirability bias (described in chapter 3, paragraph 3.6 Quality of the study).

While there is safety and openness respondents also talked about more unsafe aspects of their perceived psychological safety. Employees talked about how speaking up can be seen as a form of vulnerability. I found out that more than half of the respondents here thought about the consequences of speaking up after something happened related to how others would perceive them after speaking up. Some felt as if they would be perceived as weak after speaking up. What most employees feel safe doing is speaking up when they see something wrong happening to someone else. When the issue is not about themselves but involves another person being treated unjustly, all respondents confirmed that they would speak up in such a situation. Respondent 3 explains how (s)he responded to a sexist remark:

‘I often say something about it at the moment. Like, someone said something really sexist, which I personally found unacceptable. And I think I’m quite tolerant. And I said, “You just can’t say that.” (Respondent 3)

I also spoke with employees who did not feel safe in their team or felt some blockades in talking about certain subjects. This has to do with a certain team atmosphere which in most cases had to do with the way these teams were managed. Respondent 3 talks about how (s)he does not feel safe in the team due to certain team dynamics.

‘I don’t think I’m a difficult person to work with. I consider myself quite approachable. But what I’m very sensitive to is backstabbing. Some people have no problem throwing you under the bus. Right in front of you. And you think, where is this coming from? And I have people like that in my team. And I find that difficult sometimes.’ (Respondent 3)

What became clear from the interviews and observations is that feelings of unsafety with regards to other people in a team were mostly related to the attitude and actions of the manager of that specific team. Team leads, managers, seem to have an influence on how the psychological safety is perceived. In the cases of respondents from the operational level of the company, the managers are the ones responsible for a feeling of safety among the team. They

are responsible for the belief that there is a safe space for interpersonal risk taking in which the employees dare to speak up with ideas and questions and that they feel valued when speaking up (Edmondson, 2018).

The data also show a mixed environment. The next quote shows a difficulty in addressing shortcomings and keeping a level of trust between colleagues:

‘‘There is a kind of trust-slash-please culture. People don't want to criticize each other, because the assumption is that everyone here works with the best intentions. Everyone who works here has a good heart. Yes. And because of that, it sometimes becomes difficult to address shortcomings.’’ (Respondent 4)

This quote and the other data show that most employees experience this trust/please culture. On the one hand, there is a significant level of trust among employees. This stems from a culture in which employees perceive each other as all having good intentions and a good heart. This trust promotes a positive view of colleagues and can increase psychological safety. On the other hand, this same culture could lead to an aversion to criticism where employees avoid giving feedback or addressing issues directly. In such cultures, it may be challenging to discuss shortcomings and areas needing improvement. Psychological safety also entails the ability to speak up about problems without fear of damaging relationships or facing negative consequences (Edmondson, 2018).

Finally, a factor that seemed to play a significant role for someone in the company to feel safe to speak up or not had to do with personality traits. Respondents talked about how they would for example personally talk to someone, but how they understood that someone else with other personality traits would not do that. Individual personality traits play a significant role in choosing to speak up or to remain silent.

In summary, the organization enjoys a level of psychological safety in terms of interpersonal trust, interpersonal relations with close colleagues and positive assumptions about colleagues' intentions. Not all employees experience psychological safety within their team due to the behavior of their team lead. There is also an avoidance to engage in constructive criticism and giving feedback which could undermine this psychological safety, as it prevents open and honest communication about potentially important subjects. Finally, individual personality

traits seem to be of influence when studying psychological safety in this company. In the following paragraph about fear, there is a more detailed discussion on the avoiding behavior of giving criticism to one another.

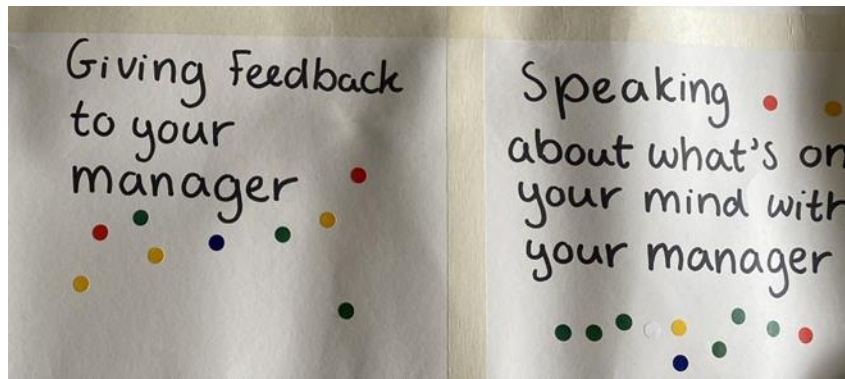
4.1.2 Fear

Fear is a reason not to speak up for employees. The data clearly show how fear is related to the speak-up culture within the organization. First, respondents talk about a culture in which they do not feel comfortable voicing their concerns or taking responsibility. Employees also fear to take personal responsibility for specific projects. This is a fear of repercussions or negative judgments where people do not want to be held accountable for a specific project. Employees felt confused on different occasions about who was responsible for a certain rule or project. When they tried to talk about it with the one responsible they could not identify the person who was ultimately accountable. A practical example of this was the gender neutral toilets in the building about which an employee wanted to ask questions with regards to women who did not feel comfortable with it, but this employee could not find the person(s) responsible.

In addition, most employees seem to be sensitive to hierarchical relationships, perceived differences in power between employees. When someone perceived as superior is involved, employees feel unsafe to express their dissatisfaction in a more direct manner or provide feedback. This hierarchical pressure is an aspect of fear in the environment that impacts the speak-up culture. The next quote is an example of one of these expressions:

‘‘At the moment when someone is somewhat above me, I usually don't feel safe to say, "Hey, what you did just now, I really didn't like it." Because to me, it feels like, well, yeah.’’ (Respondent 11)

This fear can also be seen in the poster where giving feedback to your manager and speaking about what is on your mind to your manager received blue and yellow stickers which indicate a feeling of fear or taking a risk when thinking about these actions.



Thirdly, some employees perceive that aspects of the organization's culture may also limit the expression of certain emotions like anger, which can be necessary for addressing grievances. Without the space to express such emotions, employees might suppress their feelings, leading to unresolved issues and dissatisfaction:

“But if we have a culture where none of us are allowed to get angry, and we don't have a physical place in the company to be angry, out of the public eye, then anger is suddenly no longer allowed in this organization.” (Respondent 3)

Here the respondent perceives the emotion of anger as an emotion that is not allowed in the company. There is no place in the company, due to the culture, to act out which (s)he perceives as something that is a necessary emotion for some people to act on in order to go on. Other respondents talk about the same feeling of not expressing certain emotions, due to a fear of looking weak or not be taken seriously. Two times I heard the hypothetical example of “the hysterical woman”, in which an emotional women is not taken seriously, because she is seen as hysterical. This fear of not being taken seriously when getting too emotional can prevent some emotions from being shown.

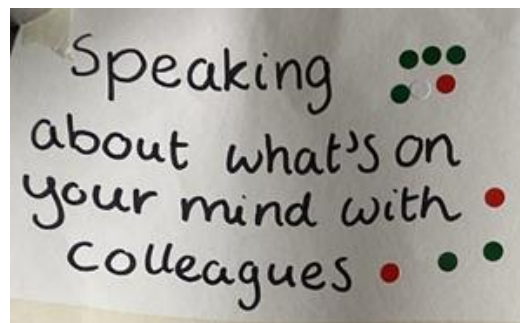
At last, when talking about giving and receiving feedback there seems to be a struggle with it. While many employees express a desire to receive feedback, they struggle to provide it due to fear of being disliked or causing discomfort. This paradox highlights a significant barrier in developing a feedback culture. The fear of negative reactions prevents honest and constructive communication, this can be seen in the next quote:

‘‘The funny thing about feedback is that almost everyone says, ‘‘Oh, I really appreciate getting feedback But if you then ask, ‘‘Do you find it easy to give feedback?’’ everyone finds it very difficult, because we are afraid that others won’t like us.’’ (Respondent 14)

To conclude, the aspects of fear that impact the speak-up culture are multifaceted. Data show there exists a common fear for taking responsibility and accountability, for hierarchical dynamics, for the expression of certain emotions and for giving feedback. This paragraph showed how fear influences speak-up culture negatively, the next paragraph shows the opposite. It describes how trust improves the speak-up culture.

4.1.3 Trust

Trust is an important component of a psychologically safe speak-up culture, as it allows employees to feel secure in their interactions and contributions without fear of negative reactions (Edmondson & Lei, 2014). The data show various ways in which trust is related to speak-up culture. From the poster it becomes clear that employees trust their colleagues in speaking up about what’s on their mind.



During interviews respondents explain that trust is important in close working relationships, where colleagues can discuss more sensitive topics. This shows an environment where employees trust each other enough to share concerns and insights. The data describe informal trust networks where employees feel comfortable sharing information with close colleagues, even discussing the use of speak-up mechanisms.

“So people often find it difficult to speak up. You notice that team meetings can sometimes fall silent because of this. However, when they are together in a smaller group afterwards, they do express their opinions.” (Respondent 1)

This also indicates that although formal channels for speaking up exist, employees might still rely on informal networks where they feel a higher level of trust. The most difficult cases had to do with trust between the teams of different countries that are all part of the company. This had to do with working towards the same goals and trusting colleagues from other countries with projects. According to some respondents, certain international teams have more difficulty in trusting other international teams. This trust is a different kind of trust compared to the trust that is displayed on the poster and in other data. That kind of trust is more about trusting someone close to you with sensitive personal matters whilst this kind of trust has to do with trusting each other with tasks and responsibilities in collaboration.

In short, employees do feel trust towards their direct colleagues when it comes to personal more sensitive matters. All employees spoken with for this study talked about how they all had someone in the company which they trusted with their personal matters. Most employees would go directly to this person on a more informal level than to a formal speak-up portal. However, when it comes to more work related responsibilities the level of trust in other employees varies, although this is something that the company is working towards now. In relation to speak-up this level of trust is something that they try to work on during sessions and in teams. Another factor that entails trusting other colleagues has to do with taking social risks. Employees who feel at risk when speaking up fear social backlash. Trust in other colleagues to take their action seriously lacks. The next part of this chapter shows how taking social risks influences the speak-up culture.

4.1.4 Taking social risks

Taking social risks seems to be something which plays an important role in speaking up in de company. For example in talking more critical to each other. In situations in which there would be an incentive to speak-up some employees feel difficulty to do so. Due to the social risk it represents according to them. In the company employees often fear social rejection, gossip or damaging relationships rather than direct reprisals.

“Look. I'm not personally afraid of losing my job. But I am afraid of the bullying that could result from it.” (Respondent 3)

Most employees felt this way, however some did not feel a strong sense of obtaining the best social relations which did help them in speaking up. Due to the fact that they were less concerned about fitting in or being liked, it positively impacted their speaking up manners with regards to social risks that could be a barrier to other colleagues. Furthermore, the data show a mixed picture in terms of feeling safe or at risk to say everything within the organization. Unspoken social rules also seem to influence the feeling of safety employees experience. Respondent 13 explains this as a certain normative framework and calls these unspoken social rules ‘social behavior’:

“So, you see that there is a certain normative framework that you have to adhere to. And if you don't, you kind of fall by the wayside. Uh yes, that is indeed social behavior.”
(Respondent 13)

Finally, when talking about speak-up amongst employees in a lot of cases it was in a sarcastic manner. Speak-up in these cases was seen as a joke. In a lot of cases when coming into a situation in which someone would not feel comfortable, ‘speak-up’ as a concept is used as a joke. This makes it harder for people to speak up, because the social risk of using it in a serious manner becomes higher. This can diminish all the practices and actions the company has taken to enhance the speak-up culture in the organization. The next quote is an example of how people would talk about speak-up in some cases and shows exactly what the data of the observations also show:

"It's actually a bit... It's a bit cheesy. Especially since you're sitting here. But we do make jokes about speaking up regularly. So when people say something that's not acceptable. That really can't be said. Then we always say, Speak up. Speak up!" (Respondent 3)

In short, in the company social risks significantly impact the willingness to speak up, including giving feedback. Employees often fear social rejection, gossip, or damaging relationships rather than direct reprisals. There are certain unspoken social rules within the

company that influence the speak-up culture, under which the use of speak-up as a joke. While most employees share these concerns, some are less worried about fitting in or being liked, which helps them speak up despite the social risks. Social risk taking has to do with social relationships. In the company social relationships differ and power seems to have an impact on these relations. The next paragraph elaborates on these power relations.

4.1.5 Power relations

Power relations influence the perceived speak-up culture in different ways for different people. As explained in the conceptual framework of this study, the Social Dominance Orientation (SDO) refers to an individual's preference for clear hierarchical structures. Individuals with high SDO hold back to speak-up when they perceive themselves as being in lower positions in the organization. The presence of SDO reflects an acceptance of hierarchical social structures within the organization. SDO suggests that for individuals with a low SDO, their decision to speak up is less affected by the power positions within the organization. Thus, for people with low SDO, the influence of hierarchical power on their willingness to speak up is minimal (Islam & Zyphur, 2005).

Data shows that in this organization most respondents feel the influence of hierarchical power positions. This can indicate a high level of SDO, but it also has to do with other factors. Most employees working at the more operational level did feel a certain distance between them and higher management. This is something that can also be seen when walking around the company. Where, for a financial sector company, the clothing style was more casual for most employees, wearing shirts, jeans or other more informal clothing. In contrast, top management always showed up in full suit. Respondent 11 talks about the distance (s)he feels between her/him and top management.

“You really have a very different kind of position, so you probably won't listen to it. And yes then I feel a bit vulnerable at the moment.... In any case, at that level, it's not easy to approach someone. But in this way, not at all, of course.” (Respondent 11)

Here the respondent 11 tells how (s)he would not go to the manager with issues, due to the distance (s)he feels between them and more operational level workers. Other respondents describe examples of situations in the company in which power relations are explicitly clear

to them. The next quote is an example of a situation in which the distance between an employee that holds a position as manager and an employee that works at the operational level becomes clear. These actions describe a certain distance between higher management and operational level employees:

“Certain groups are particularly guilty of it. People who always see themselves as somewhat untouchable. And these are mostly people in the upper layer. I had just booked a room and normally I can wait for two more minutes. He says: Yeah, a few more minutes. Then I ended up waiting for a quarter of an hour. No apologies. Nothing. So the person I was with addressed the behavior. Like, hey. This is not okay. Our meeting is delayed because of this. And then the person from higher management literally said: Yeah, but our meeting is much more important.” (Respondent 3)

Respondents holding a higher positions describe this power distance too when they experienced it the other way around. Respondent 14, as someone holding a high position in the company, talks about how directors are seen as the ones having most knowledge of projects while (s)he would like to see it the other way around in which employees working at the operational level should be the ones having more input in big projects due to their practical knowledge:

“In principle, this is a very accessible company. In the sense of a somewhat flatter organization. Yes, if you approach a manager here who is busy, it's not a problem at all. Yes. But at the same time, it's a very old-fashioned culture Here, directors are also involved if there's a difficult project. You have to approach the director first. No, why? You should approach the employees who know the most about it.” (Respondent 14)

Respondent 14 also talks about the concept of a ‘flatter’ organization. This company is by over half of the respondents also perceived as an organization that is less hierarchical than other similar companies in the financial sector. The poster shows that in the field ‘Sharing thoughts and ideas with you managers’ most stickers are green and red, which means safe and trust. ‘Giving feedback to your manager’ seems somewhat more difficult with more yellow (risky) stickers. In the field of ‘speaking about what’s on your mind with your manager’ most stickers are again more green and red. This could also be an example of the Social Desirability Bias (SDB) as the poster has been displayed in an open area, whilst interviews were conducted in a more private setting.



Finally, cultural differences seem to be an important influence on how people perceive and respond to hierarchical structures. The company central to this study is internationally based. The headquarters are based in the Netherlands and next to this they are situated in other countries on the European continent. This is why it was important to also speak with employees based in other countries in order to find out more about the perceived speak-up culture. The next quote shows how hierarchical differences exist between the different nationalities in the company:

“Well, for example, in Spain I notice that people are much more sensitive to hierarchy. So if the director takes time to talk with another employee, it’s like, oh, the director is important and so on. Whereas here, okay, it’s just that guy I know, and that’s totally fine. And the British are perhaps a bit more formal and more subtle in their communication.” (Respondent 13)

Here the respondent describes how in Spain, there is a strong sensitivity to hierarchy, where the UK has a more formal and subtle way of interacting. When there is a strong sense of hierarchy, people are less likely to speak up (Pangestu & Rahajeng, 2020). This contrasts with the Netherlands, where a more egalitarian approach is common, and employees feel more comfortable in communicating with directors.

Thus, power relations play a significant role in the company in relation to a speak-up culture. This relation becomes clear from the way in which people perceive how valued their input is and if they are listened to in the same amount as employees with other positions. This can withhold employees from speaking up. On the other hand, a lot of employees do perceive managers as more approachable in comparison to other organizations in their sector. At last,

cultural differences seem to play an important role in how different employees perceive and experience the power relations in the company.

4.2 The importance of culture and leaders in the Ethical Climate

The ethical climate which comprises the perceived ethical organizational practices and procedures (Victor & Cullen, 1988). The ethical climate influences the behavior of employees, including the speak-up behavior (DeConinck, 2011). This part of the chapter describes the perceived factors of the ethical climate in the company of this study. These factors entail the corporate culture, the perceptions of ‘good’ and ‘bad’, the company as a moral actor and ethical leadership. The following paragraphs answer the next question:

How do employees perceive the ethical climate and ethical leadership in company X?

4.2.1 Corporate Culture

The data highlight various aspects of the corporate culture in relation with ethical standards within the organization. The first thing that comes to light are the answers of the respondents working in higher positions in the organization who had already worked in other financial sector organizations. All respondents explained that working at the company of this study gave them more satisfaction due to the culture.

The data indicate a commitment to personal integrity and ethical standards. This suggests that, for some employees, aligning personal values with professional roles is critical, even if it means sacrificing financial benefits. This shows a desire to work in an environments where one can genuinely contribute and align with one's values. These values also entail a discussion surrounding a reorganization that has just happened in the organization. Respondents describe that after this reorganization more employees were taken on from other places in the financial sector. Before this only people who specifically aligned with the values of this organization were taken in. This personal alignment with the values seem to be less important in hiring staff then before the reorganization according to some of the respondents:

“Within the company, various interests are at play, and there is quite a bit of maneuvering and playing off against each other. Whereas I once had the impression that we were all in it together, now it feels more like different people want different things.” (Respondent 11)

This respondent describes the swift that (s)he feels with regards to the ethical values employees have. This value driven employee base comes with challenges. The swift is by some respondents seen as necessary for a growing financial organization. All respondents give descriptions of the workplace culture as kind and soft, with a preference for maintaining harmony and avoiding conflict, highlight a nurturing but potentially passive environment due to the value driven employees. This can lead to challenges in addressing and resolving issues effectively.

“Organizations with a more progressively left-leaning orientation tend to assume that people act with good intentions, making it harder to hold each other accountable. This is one aspect that I believe definitely exists at COMPANY. The second aspect is the nature of the type of employees who work at such organizations. They are naturally conflict-averse, which can sometimes be detrimental.”
(Respondent 13)

This quote shows how the ethical values of employees can get in the way of accountability and fast discussion making. Due to this need for perfection making new plans can be difficult. Employees seem to focus on smaller matters, but when it comes to taking accountability for new bigger ideas it seems to be difficult to take on accountability and responsibility. In the next quote respondent 4 shows how it can be easy for employees to take a step back from new ideas. However, it can be helpful for the organization to take up these new ideas and take follow-up action to work them out:

“It has to do with taking up ideas, and I think it also has to do with the fact that it's quite daunting to stand behind an idea, so to speak. It's very easy to be an apathetic fan of an idea. Like, "Oh, that sounds like a good idea. Good luck.”” (Respondent 4)

Finally, there are also different communication styles in different countries which affects the speak-up culture. Cultural differences are crucial to appoint when describing the perceived corporate culture. For example, colleagues from the UK are by colleagues from the Netherlands described as having a more formal and nuanced communication style, which can make their speak-up culture more subtle and indirect. The next quote shows how the Dutch employees are perceived as more direct. This influence of cultural differences also illustrate that the company's international nature may need a better understanding of various cultural norms and the need to balance these differences. The predominance of Dutch culture within

the company might overshadow other cultural practices and gets in the way of creating an inclusive environment:

“Well, I have to tell you, in the Netherlands, I must say, I have the general impression that in the Netherlands people are more direct and assertive in their responses. ... With Dutch colleagues, I sometimes see... In the Netherlands, there is a lot of talk, but I don't always see that talk being realized in reality.” (Respondent 7)

In summary, the corporate culture appears to be one that values kindness, respect, and mission alignment, but struggles with direct communication, conflict resolution and accountability. An important factor that influences the corporate culture in relation to a speak-up culture is cultural differences. This corporate culture also shows what employees perceive as ‘good’ and ‘bad’, ethical considerations are an important element of the ethical climate in the organization. The next part of this chapter elaborates on what perceptions of ‘good’ and ‘bad’ look like in the organization.

4.2.2 Perceptions of ‘good’ and ‘bad’

Perceptions from employees about ethical norms, what is good and bad, are not explicitly talked about in the organization. With regards to a speak-up culture, all respondents explain in one way or another the importance of a speak-up culture. Right now, the organization is working on new inclusion programs to enhance a safe environment:

“There is more of a focus now on behaviors in terms of the way you undertake those tasks and the way you interact with co-workers. How they're split into certain categories which I probably can't remember but one would be around how you foster connections, how you build relationships. So the objectives are not just: I'm going to do this job by this period of time but also around how you interact with other colleagues in COMPANY.” (Respondent 12)

This quote shows how the organization works on the way colleagues interact with each other in order to create a safe environment. There exists an emphasis on creating a safe environment for employees to express themselves. It reflects an understanding of workplace culture that values openness and safety to speak up.

There are however different views on how to obtain this open speak-up culture and what good and bad aspects of the culture are right now. Employees working on the more operational level describe how important they find the physical presence of their manager with regards to a good speak-up culture:

“I think it's partly a matter of attitude or something. And being physically present makes people more or less approachable. Being physically present is also a good thing. For example, I've never even physically seen our, I don't even know what her role is, actually the head of X.” (Respondent 11)

This respondent describes how (s)he perceives being physically present as a good thing. This makes people more approachable to go to and speak about what is on their mind. From the observations it becomes clear that most managers are busy and do not have time for extra matters on their office day. Most managers would be physically at the office one or two days.

Furthermore, due to the growth of this organization, employees see difficulties in balancing this growth with ethical values the organization was built on. The next quote shows what the respondent feels about how after the reorganization different people have been brought in due to the organizational growth of the company:

“It's simply a philosophical mindset. And most people genuinely come to work for the COMPANY because they find this important and you can see that. Generally, in the lower levels, this is just the normal course of things. But you do notice that in this hierarchical ladder setting, things just go wrong at some point. And some people, as a result, seem unreachable. And I find that unfortunate.” (Respondent 3)

Other respondents confirm this sentiment. There seem to be different ethical perceptions about what is good and what is bad when thinking about how the organization should develop itself in the financial sector. On one side employees feel the need to grow and in that way invest in projects that support the company mission, on the other side employees feel that the company is losing sight of the mission due to this continuous growth. Some respondents talked about how older employees who worked at the company for a long time see how the organization has changed and that they do not recognize the initial company anymore. Some respondents talk about this change and how employees differ from each other. The next quote

shows how the respondent sees that not all employees share the same perceptions of what is good and what is bad:

“There you really see norms and values. And a lot of people here, I think, have the idea that it's all the same. When I played the dilemma game here in the department, you have to play with a group of four and deal with dilemmas. I played it for an entire afternoon and only once did I have a situation where all four people made the same choice.” (Respondent 14)

The respondent describes that not everyone is the same. The assumption that everyone shares the same values can lead to miscommunications and conflicts when differences arise. Playing a game using dilemma's to think about this difference in values brings to light how employees think differently. Furthermore, it is interesting to see how values change over time and how different generations think differently about what ethical standards are. This also shows how society changes and that this is also an important factor to keep in mind when thinking about a speak-up culture. Changing societal norms impact the way a 'good' and 'ethical' speak-up culture looks like. The next quote shows how an older employee describes the changes in ethical standards over time:

“What happened to me back then, nowadays, would you really make a speak-up report or something like that, I don't know. So I do think, society has also changed, and things we used to think were funny, aren't funny anymore. So I think it's too simplistic to say it's COMPANY's fault. I think society is also changing.” (Respondent 2)

Overall, the analysis reveals how the organization is working on creating an inclusive and safe environment. Employees do feel the need for managers to be more physically present in order to be more approachable. Next to this, there seems to be a challenge in balancing the growth of the organization with the ethical values it is based on. There are differences in opinions from employees about this, while there is an assumption that everyone in the company shares the same values, actually this does not seem the case. Furthermore, generations and societal changes also influence the moral compass of employees. The conceptual framework of this study describes that ethical norms and values are not only stated by individuals, but are also a responsibility of the company. The company itself can uphold ethical standards and it act as a moral agent. The next part elaborates on how the company is perceived as a moral actor.

4.2.2 Company as moral actor

The company is perceived as a moral actor through various perspectives from employees. In the conceptual framework of this study is described how companies can act as a moral actor through their code of conduct or other ethical standards they uphold with their mission for example. The organization itself is addressed by all respondents during the interviews.

The need for better promotion of speak-up tools underscores a moral responsibility from the organization to ensure employees feel safe to speak up. Other respondents talk about the way in which they informally do talk about things at the coffee corner for example, but how they would never use the formal ways to raise their voice:

‘‘There’s a lot of talk and discussion going on. And when it comes to speaking up, of course, it doesn’t happen to me openly, but it always happens at the coffee corner.’’ (Respondent 2)

Here the company can be seen as moral actor to publicize this formal ways in a more positive light. Next to this, the company acts as a moral actor in the way they construct the ethical values of the company and how they spread these ethical values amongst their employees. As described in the paragraph above (Perceptions of ‘good’ and ‘bad’ 4.2.2) there is a shift in the company and the employees that are hired. Respondents explain how the company acts as a moral actor in how new employees are hired. The shift towards hiring diverse talent and moving away from a culture of ‘clones’. This is part of the challenge for the company in growing and maintaining their ethical standards:

‘‘Things are changing. More and more people are joining, coming from outside. That already helps. The HR policy was very focused on finding clones, ensuring people fit the mission. I used to joke about this. If we were a hospital and we were looking for a new heart surgeon, and you had a culture like COMPANY in your hospital, and a really excellent heart surgeon applied, but there was also one who fit very well with our hospital culture but had never actually performed heart surgery. We would be capable of saying, “Heart surgery can be learned.”’’ (Respondent 14)

This analogy of the heart surgeon that the respondent gives describes the tension between maintaining an ethical fit between the employee and the company and between ensuring professional competence for a growing company in the financial sector. This respondent raised questions about the competence of people who are mostly hired for their ethical values instead of their professional competence.

Overall, the company is striving to act as a moral actor, with initiatives like the speak-up portal, the ways in which the company mission and values are shared, the standards for hiring new employees and the physical building of the company. Furthermore, ethical standards of the company can also be seen in how leaders behave and how employees perceive these leaders as ethical. The next paragraph shows how ethical leadership in the company is perceived.

4.2.4 Ethical leadership

Employees and the company seem to have a lot of ideas about how a leader should act ethically. More than half of the respondents feel discomfort in one way or another due to the way which their perceived leader in the company acts. Many respondents highlight a good leader should recognize the importance of open communication and giving feedback. Leaders are encouraged to create an environment where team members feel comfortable expressing themselves and providing feedback. This includes being open to criticism, actively seeking feedback, and creating opportunities for dialogue. The next quote shows how the respondent thinks about a leader as having the job to create open dialogue for the emotional level on which a team operates:

“ I think that's one of your core tasks as a team lead. Essentially, it's not about drawing out the content. But ensuring that the content experts can do that. Because they share the social-emotional aspect, which is a shared space. A kind of clean and fertile ground. ” (Respondent 5)

This shows how the employee perceives the job for the manager as being the one to ensure the social-emotional aspect of a team is dealt with in order for the team to work on content. This means for the manager to create a comfortable space for open conversation. Another respondent describes how important empathy is for a leader and that (s)he misses this in her/his manager:

“Empathy is completely lacking, you could say. And she can't do anything about it, because it's just a character trait. ” (Respondent 6)

Thus, this respondent perceives an ethical leader as someone who has empathy and an emotional understanding of other employees. At the more operational level of the company, employees feel as if their managers do not have enough practical knowledge about the subject they manage. This leads to tensions between employees who possess a high level of knowledge about the matter and managers who make decisions, without really knowing what is going on. Respondent 11 describes in the next quote how the manager of her/his team is not well-informed enough to make good decisions. The respondent is of opinion that ethical leaders should know what their team is doing and obtain enough knowledge to make well informed decisions:

“And so, this is someone who, in principle, should know what we are doing. And well, you know, then I received an email and from that it was clear that, well, I actually have no idea, but I pretend like I do.” (Respondent 11)

Finally, it is important for all respondents to have a leader who is open to feedback and criticism. Employees understand that mistakes can be made and there should be room to give feedback to their manager to talk about this and to improve. The next respondent talks in the quote about feedback and that feedback rounds are not done enough in the company. (S)He perceives an ethical leader as someone who actively asks for feedback.

“Yeah, I actually think that a manager should ask about that and actually should, encourage to gather that feedback.” (Respondent 8)

Overall, the data show how employees find it important for a leader to have empathy and to create an emotional safe space for the team they lead. Next to this, they perceive an ethical leader as someone to make well-informed decisions and as someone who actively asks for feedback and is open for it. Commitment from leaders for these ethical standards seem to be important for employees. The paragraph about commitment from the top (4.4.1) shows how employees perceive their leaders in practice. The next part of this chapter shows the relationship between this perceived ethical leadership, the ethical climate and speak-up culture.

4.3 Relationship ethical climate, ethical leadership and speak-up culture

The data show that a speak-up culture is related to the ethical climate and ethical leadership of the company of this study in different ways. This paragraph answers the next question: *What is the relation between the ethical climate, ethical leadership and the speak-up culture in corporation X?*

First, we see that there is a culture in which fear consists of giving feedback or criticism to one another. A culture of trust is essential for effective feedback mechanisms. The data illustrate that whilst employees appreciate receiving feedback, they find it difficult to give it due to fears of being disliked. Most respondents view giving feedback as a social risk. This paradox highlights the importance of creating an ethical environment where trust and open communication are normalized as ethical values. In creating these ethical values in which giving and receiving feedback is perceived as important, it becomes easier for employees to give and receive constructive feedback.

Secondly, the company reveals a culture of softness. Employees see each other in a certain light, where the focus is always on the positive side of each other. This ‘soft’ culture in which shortcomings are not spoken about due to the ethical climate makes it harder for employees to speak up. Due to the feeling that there would not be a follow up action when revealing shortcomings, employees can be discouraged to speak up:

‘‘And this makes it sometimes difficult to discuss shortcomings. Because, you know, he's trying his best. This softness means that even though there is a sympathetic ear listening, it can be hard for certain things to truly be heard. It can also be quite daunting to voice such concerns.’’ (Respondent 4)

On one side there is a sympathetic ear listening which is a welcoming factor for speaking up. On the other side, due to the soft culture employees can experience a feeling of not being listened to when there is no vision on a follow-up action due to the softness of the organization. This softness stems from the ethical climate in which values of not creating tension prevail above values of taking action on shortcomings.

Next to this, there also exists a relationship between power relations perceived by employees and what an ethical leader should look like. Employees are discouraged to speak up when

they perceive their input as not valued. From the data it becomes clear that employees perceive an ethical leader as someone to create space to speak up and to have empathy. Employees describe these factors as important for getting the feeling of really being listened to. An ethical leader should also be approachable and open for criticism. This approachability is something that is perceived in different ways by the respondents due to their different positions in different teams. The next quote shows that the ethical climate surrounding norms and values about leadership in the company influence this approachability:

“So, I came to introduce myself. I was replacing someone who was going on maternity leave. And my wife was also due to give birth soon. So, I had to introduce myself to the group. And I said, yes, I have my phone on standby because I could be called at any moment. So, during that time, Director X, I met him days later by the coffee machine and he knew my name. He said, “Hey X, how are you? How’s everything at home? Everything good?”. He knew my name and he showed interest in me. And if I look at the company I worked before, he was the boss of my boss. I also call him the boss of my boss, right? I would say hello, but I would not get a response back. You see that at COMPANY this is very different.” (Respondent 8)

The behavior of this particular manager makes her/him more approachable for employees to speak up to when needed. Not all managers are considered to be an ethical leader according to the respondents and the answers that have been given surrounding managers on the poster.

In short, the ethical climate in which ethical values and norms of the company exist influences the way in which employees perceive the speak-up culture.

4.4 Tone at the top from a Whistleblowing Framework perspective

There are different factors in an organization that enable an effective whistleblowing framework (Erin & Bamigboye, 2020). As discussed in the conceptual framework of this study, the cultural dimension of the whistleblowing framework has the potential to enhance the speak-up culture of an organization. This part of the results chapter analyses two factors of the cultural dimension from the whistleblowing framework: commitment from the top and formal communication by the company. The last paragraph (4.4.3) discusses how these factors can enhance the speak-up culture in the company of this study. The following paragraphs answer the next question: *Which parts of the cultural dimension of the whistleblowing framework can be seen in relation to the perceived speak-up culture?*

4.4.1 Commitment from the top

How commitment from top management is perceived influences the speak-up culture in different ways. In the paragraph on ethical leadership (4.2.4) it becomes clear that employees find it important for leaders to have empathy, to create an emotional safe space and to make well-informed decisions asking for feedback from the team. When thinking about how their leaders acted in practice, all respondents talked about the responsibilities and actions of top management surrounding the speak-up culture. Some respondents were already further in their process when thinking about speak-up policies and named this commitment from the top: Tone at the Top. Some respondents perceived top management as very committed in pursuing a safe environment in which speaking up is encouraged.

Other respondents also believe that this management has the best intentions, but sometimes due to lack of time or the distance between them and the manager it can be difficult for employees to perceive management as genuinely committed. The next respondent talks about (s)he does not feel safe to speak her/his mind to the manager, because (s)he perceives the distance between them to be too big to open up:

“Yes, she is also with X, our HR manager, or I don’t know, the person who is now in charge of diversity and inclusion. But yes, she is in the UK. Yes, you know, I don’t even know that lady. I have never seen her. Then I think, yes, should I tell you what I think about it? No.” (Respondent 6)

Here it shows that managers are perceived less committed when not showing enough interaction with their employees. Employees feel more comfortable speaking to their manager if they see them and interact with them regularly. Lack of visibility and direct interaction can make top management seem unapproachable and disconnected. The next quote shows what the respondent perceives as an important facet for management to improve:

"Being present on the work floor, that's one of the things. Also just dropping by a team meeting occasionally. Of course, you have your own project management team meetings, but if a director from X drops by every so often I think that would be a very good thing." (Respondent 8)

In order to work on closing this gap between top management and employees in the organization top management has started introducing walk-in consultation hours where employees are welcome to come and talk with them about what is on their mind. Half of the respondents perceive this walk-in hour as a symbolic gesture instead of a genuine attempt to engage with employees and to enhance the speak-up culture:

Introducing the walk-in consultation was, for us, yet another example, I was just discussing this with a colleague, of how our upper management often reacts very quickly to situations without proper consideration. This move essentially confirmed an issue we've been facing with them: their tendency to make hasty decisions. (Respondent 11)

This quote shows how there is skepticism about the decision to organize this walk-in consultation. The respondent feels that this is a hasty move to point out that the issue is dealt with, instead of a meaningful action based on feedback from the employees. When asking employees during interviews and the observations in the company if they already made use of this walk-in hour nobody seemed to have tried it.

To summarize the perceptions about commitment from the top, managers do express a willingness to be open to discussions and to work on a better speak-up culture. This is also perceived as an important value for ethical leadership. However, practical challenges like busy schedules and physical availability limit actual opportunities for speaking up. This creates a perception of symbolic rather than genuine openness. The next paragraph shows how the formal communication in the form of rules, practices and procedures from the company and its management about speak-up culture is perceived by the employees.

4.4.2 Formal communication company

The company communicates practicalities that have been installed formally in different ways. These practical matters can be rules and procedures in for example the form of a code of conduct. In the conceptual framework of this study other practical examples of best practices for a speak-up culture are given (Vandekerckhove, 2018). The next quote shows some examples of what channels this employee perceives:

‘‘We have, you know, an intranet, which also indicates what you can do if you experience something that concerns you. Well, we have a whistleblower policy, and of course, we have the speak-up tool for anonymous concerns. Naturally, you can go to your manager, but you can also go to the confidential advisor, where you can choose between my colleague and me internally, or we have an external confidential advisor.’’ (Respondent 2)

This respondent talks directly about the communication channels there are surrounding the speak-up culture. This shows the organization does think about the ways in which a speak-up culture can be enhanced.

Furthermore, the data show that top management in the organization misses the point of view and feeling from the more operational level employees in implementing new rules. The next two quote shows there exists a disbalance in the perceptions of higher management and other employees. This respondent talks about how new rules and practices from management are not working due to the lack from managers of understanding the perceptions of the employers:

‘‘Yes, then they come up with something that is really just not realistic. But we suddenly have to do it. Yes, sorry. But then we say, no, that’s not going to work. And now people are busy with a business case to show that it really isn’t going to work. And that takes a lot of time and energy.’’ (Respondent 1)

In summary, the formal communication from the company show how top management has the best intentions in enhancing the speak-up culture. Whilst the company puts a lot of effort in constructing a good speak-up culture, the efforts to create new practices lack the point of view from employees.

4.4.3 How can commitment from the top and formal communication from the company enhance the speak-up culture?

The conceptual framework of this study shows that commitment from managers, how they act and interact, and the formal communication practices have the potential to enhance a safe speak-up culture (Duan et al., 2019; Heres et al., 2022). The paragraphs above (4.4.1 & 4.4.2) show that there are factors in the company that diminish or enhance the speak-up culture in

the company. The following paragraph answers the next question: *How can the whistleblowing framework in company X enhance the speak-up culture?*

In commitment from the top it is clear that when employees perceive genuine efforts from management to create a safe environment, as illustrated by Respondent 12's positive experience with the co-workers survey, they feel more encouraged to voice their concerns and to speak-up. On the other hand, a perceived lack of genuine interaction, as noted by Respondent 6, where the HR manager was seen as distant and unapproachable, can hinder employees' willingness to speak up. Regular interaction and visibility of top management can bridge this gap, making employees feel more connected and valued.

Practical actions, such as walk-in consultation hours, can enhance the speak-up culture if perceived as genuine. However, as Respondent 11 indicated, if these actions are viewed as hasty or symbolic, they may not encourage employees to speak up. These actions can even result in the opposite. Direct engagement, such as top management attending team meetings occasionally (as suggested by Respondent 8), can enhance their commitment and make employees feel their voices are heard and valued. This presence can help in building trust and a more approachable top management.

Even though top management does express a genuine willingness to create an open speak-up culture, practical challenges like busy schedules and physical unavailability can limit the ways in which they act on it.

The formal communication in the company is also a way in which the speak-up culture could be enhanced. The data show that there are various formal communication channels, such as intranet resources, whistleblower policies, and anonymous speak-up tools, as mentioned by Respondent 2. This indicates the organization's effort in promoting a speak-up culture. These channels provide employees with multiple ways in which they can speak up.

However, the way in which formal communication is perceived by employees plays a crucial role. For example, the labelling of employees as 'relevant persons' can create distance between employees and affect morale, as highlighted by Respondent 3. This unintentional formal communication can lead to feelings of exclusion and discourage employees from speaking up.

There is also a notable disbalance between top management and operational level employees in terms of understanding the effects and impact of new rules and practices. As pointed out by

different respondents, initiatives that do not consider employees' perspectives and practicalities can lead to frustration and resistance. Effective speak-up practices require management to consider and incorporate feedback from all levels of the organization and really talking with employees when constructing these new practices.

Enhancing a speak-up culture using commitment from the top and formal communication from the company requires a genuine and visible commitment from top management combined with effective and well-thought-out formal communication.

5. Discussion

At this point in the study, having spent different days for a period of three months at a private organization, having talked to different people with different backgrounds, having gathered all data, having analyzed all data, it is time to take a look at how this study contributes to existing theories.

Looking at existing research done in the private sector surrounding whistleblowing and speak-up, literature shows that it is hard to study these specific subjects due to the rapid changing climate surrounding the concepts (Mrowiec, 2022). This study shows how these changes influence the way in which employees perceive the speak-up culture. The results show that generational differences and changing norms and values influence the way in which an employee thinks about speaking-up.

Using pictures at the beginning of the interviews helped a lot in creating a shared understanding with the respondents of what the interview was about and how they perceived it. During the interviews I started with letting the respondents explain what pictures they made and how they perceived the concept of a speak-up culture in relation to the pictures. Lal et al. (2012) describe how using a photo-method, which means giving participants an assignment which makes them think about the subject before the interview can help in getting more detailed answers from participants. This study is an example of this theory and also adds that the photo-method helps in creating a shared understanding about the topic of the study between the participant and the interviewer. It helps participants to get on the same page as the interviewer. This understanding was important during the interviews, this made that I could better interpret the data during the analysis of the specific respondents.

In theories related to speak-up culture from the past there are different norms and values surrounding speaking-up. For example, the theory from Van Dyne and LePine (1998) that describes in an article from 1998 how employees who voice their concerns show extra-role behavior. As explained in the conceptual framework of this study, extra-role behavior is related to in-role behavior. In role behavior of an employee here is explained as the required behavior that is needed for the essential job. This behavior forms the basis of the regular performance of the employee. Extra-role behavior is described as positive additional actions that are formally not needed or specified in job descriptions. It is characterized as valued by supervisors for the contribution it gives to the organization. Here voicing concerns, speaking

up, is seen as extra-role behavior. However, in later theories about employer voice and psychological safety that is needed for employees to voice their concerns, speaking-up is seen as something that all employees should keep in mind and act on when needed. It is not seen as extra-role behavior anymore, but as something embedded in the role of all employees. The role of psychological safety as Edmondson (2018) describes it becomes more important. More and more theories about speak-up are developed (Yue et al., 2022). This study shows that employees from different generations perceive speak-up differently and use the concept in different ways. Older employees for example talked about how they feel their perceptions of a safe environment differ from their younger peers. For these employees to use specific forms of humor they had been used to, becomes harder due to changing norms and values in society. This shows that not only theories of how speak-up should be used in companies change, but also theories about norms, values and topics surrounding the speak-up culture should follow in this change. This study adds new information to the existing theories about how specific norms and values in a private company in the Netherlands look like in the present day.

Additionally, this study gives new practical insights into theories about psychological safety. Where Kwon et al. (2020) have argued that employees would ask for more feedback when feeling safe and feeling less worried about negative consequences, this study shows how difficult giving feedback can be, even in an environment where people do trust each other. For example, respondents describe a culture of mutual trust in colleagues working at the company, believing that everyone has good intentions and a kind heart. However, in a lot of cases employees seem to avoid criticizing each other. This atmosphere creates a high level of trust and a positive perception of colleagues, enhancing psychological safety. This culture also makes it hard for employees to address issues or give feedback, as they fear damaging relationships or creating conflict. Psychological safety, according to Edmondson (2018), also involves the ability to discuss problems openly without fearing negative consequences, which can be challenging in such a culture.

This study shows the complex relationship between psychological safety and speak-up culture. Although interpersonal trust exists among colleagues, the avoidance of criticism and feedback can undermine this safety. The concept of a "soft" culture that emphasizes positivity and trust does have a negative influence on giving and receiving feedback. This study addresses these shortcomings and challenges organizational culture and ethics. It suggests that a balance between softness and a critical voice is crucial for fostering a good ethical climate

and effective speak-up culture. This adds an extra focus on the balance between trust and an open attitude towards constructive criticism to the theories about psychological safety and organizational culture. For example, in the theoretical framework of this study different steps are described for managers to create a psychologically safe environment (McCausland, 2023). These steps entail encouraging collaboration, discuss the leaders' own limitations, organizing personal talks with employees, sharing positive experiences and being aware of behavior that could undermine the safe environment. This study shows that a another step could add to the psychological safe environment: creating space and tools for giving and receiving feedback.

Next to this, the study confirms the Social Dominance Orientation (SDO) theory (Islam & Zyphur, 2005). The results show how employees differ in speaking up in relation to the power relations and hierarchy they perceive. This study contributes to the study of Islam & Zyphur (2005) with examples from employees how cultural backgrounds influence the level of SDO. Different employees perceived for example a difference in how sensitive employees from Spain where to hierarchical relations in comparison to employees from the Netherlands. Examples of interactions with employees from different countries show this contrast. In the Netherlands, where most employees of the company work, a more egalitarian approach is perceived. This comparison shows that the speak-up culture can be influenced by the hierarchical culture of a country in which the company is located. These examples confirm theories about SDO (Pangestu & Rahajeng, 2020) that describe the concept that countries with a culture in which more hierarchical sensitivity exists, people are less likely to speak up. Whilst in egalitarian cultures like the Netherlands, open communication with higher-ups is more common.

The findings in this study also support and extend the theory on ethical leadership. The findings emphasize the importance of empathy, actively asking for feedback and approachability (Brown et al., 2005). Yue et al. (2022) argue that the communication style of leaders influences the way in which employees speak up. This study provides empirical evidence that approachable, empathetic leaders who are open to – and actively asking for feedback can stimulate an open speak-up culture and trust within organizations. Some respondents emphasize the critical role of empathy in leadership, expressing disappointment that their manager lacks this quality. Other respondents underline the importance of a leaders' emotional sensitivity towards their employees.

Although the good intentions of management in the company are recognized by employees, they still miss the physical visibility of management. One respondent for example, describes her/his feeling of unsafety when sharing thoughts with a manager, because s(he) feels too distant. This highlights the need for regular interaction. Managers are seen as more approachable when they are visible for and engage with employees. Thus, the results show how approachability can be improved by physical attendance and visibility of leaders who interact on a regular basis with their employees.

Finally this study shows that there are practical challenges for organizations in formal communication of speak-up practices. Vandekerckhove et al. (2018) and Heres et al. (2022) show different most effective policies and best practices to help with creating a psychologically safe environment to enhance the speak-up culture. However, the results point out that there is a gap between the intentions of managers and the practical realities employees experience. These best practices can be of help in fostering a speak-up culture, additionally this study shows that it is important to note that there is a need for more effective communication between management and employees when constructing these practices. For example, while regular surveys can provide valuable insights, employees express a need for more interactive and collaborative approaches. Only responding to surveys is not enough for some employees. They would like to be actively involved in creating practices to enhance the speak-up culture. This could involve brainstorming sessions, focus groups, and workshops where employees can voice their ideas and concerns directly to management. Another example is the introduction of a suggestion box, not just for anonymous feedback, but also as a tool where employees can see follow-up and actions taken based on their input.

Next to creating these practices with the use of more perspectives from employees from all levels of the organization, employees feel more valued and understood when they are given opportunities to contribute to the development of these practices. Thus, including employees in the process is also a speak-up practice in itself.

In short, there are different theoretical implications. This study demonstrates how the use of qualitative research provides deeper insights into speak-up culture. It underlines the impact of changes in society, between generations and contributes to showing empirical evidence of the complex relationship between psychological safety and feedback. Additionally, the influence

of cultural background on power dynamics in relation to a speak-up culture adds to existing literature about SDO theories. There are theoretical implications with regards to the critical role of ethical leadership. This study also reveals practical challenges in formal communication, showing a gap between intentions from managers and how employees perceive these, it shows the need for effective communication and involving employees to implement best practices in order to create an effective speak-up culture.

6 Conclusion

In this concluding chapter of the study I will answer the central question of this study and recommendations for further research will be given.

What is the perceived speak-up culture in corporation X and how can a whistleblowing framework enhance this?

The perceived speak-up culture in corporation X

To start, the first part of this question will be answered, taking into consideration the relation between the speak-up culture and the ethical climate. The perceived speak-up culture in corporation X consists of different factors. Psychological safety, fear, trust, social risks and power relations. The psychological safety has two angles. The first angle of psychological safety is perceived as positive with interpersonal trust, good relations with close colleagues and a general positive view on intentions of other employees. The second angle is perceived more negative, where not all employees feel safe due to the behavior of their team lead. Avoidance of feedback and criticism also undermines psychological safety. This also has to do with the next factor: fear. Fear has a negative impact on the perceived speak-up culture. Next to fear of giving feedback, fear is also linked to hierarchical dynamics, expression of anger and taking accountability for specific projects. Trust in colleagues varies when it comes to work-related responsibilities, which the company is currently addressing through sessions and team efforts.

Social risks, such as fear of social rejection, gossip, or damaging relationships, further hinder employees' willingness to speak up. Some employees, less concerned about fitting in, manage to speak up despite these social risks. Also the role of power relations is important to note. Employees' perceptions of how valued their input is and whether they are listened to by their managers affect their willingness to speak up. However, many employees find managers in this company more approachable compared to other organizations in the same industry. In addition to these five factors (psychological safety, fear, trust, social risk taking and power relations), there are also other interesting additional factors influencing the perceived speak-up culture that have come up during this study: The importance of cultural differences as well as individual personality traits, societal changes in values surrounding speak-up cultures and

the use of “Speak Up” as a joke. These factors also play a crucial role in whether employees choose to speak up or remain silent.

The ethical climate in the company affects the speak-up culture significantly. The ethical climate is characterized by the corporate culture, perceptions of good and bad, the company as a moral actor and ethical leadership. The corporate culture values kindness, respect, and mission alignment but does face challenges with direct communication, giving constructive criticism and accountability. The organization is working towards creating an inclusive and safe environment, with employees wanting more physical presence from managers to enhance their approachability. Finding a balance concerning the organizational growth and its ethical values is hard, with not all employees sharing the same values. The company strives to be a moral actor through initiatives like the speak-up portal, sharing its mission and values, hiring standards, and the physical environment. Employees find it important for ethical leaders to have empathy, create emotionally safe spaces, make well-informed decisions, and actively seek feedback.

The ethical climate of the company impacts the perceptions of employees surrounding the speak-up culture significantly. The corporate culture shows employees’ fear giving feedback due to concerns about being disliked. Even though they do appreciate getting feedback. In this case there is a need for an ethical environment in which trust and communication are important standards. Employees speak of a ‘soft’ culture, in which there is a focus on positive character traits of colleagues and an avoidance to discussing shortcomings. Employees feel that the concerns they voice would not lead to any follow-up actions, which holds them back from speaking up. Also the relation between the perceived speak-up culture and the ethical climate becomes clear in the role of power relations and ethical leadership. Employees are holding back from speaking up when they do not feel heard. Approachable and empathic ethical leaders can encourage a speak-up culture. The perceived approachability of leaders varies among employees based on their job, level and team. This affects the perceived speak-up culture.

How can a whistleblowing framework enhance this?

Coming to the next part of the research question: how can a whistleblowing framework enhance the speak-up culture? It is crucial to first describe how employees perceive the cultural part of the whistleblowing framework. The perceptions about commitment from the

top show that employees perceive managers to have good intentions to work on a better speak-up culture. However, busy schedules and physical availability seem to challenge the opportunities for speaking up. Then employees are not seeing the actions of managers as genuine, but rather as symbolic. The next part, formal communication from the company, shows that some unintentional formal communication from the company discourages employees to speak up. The company does show intentions to enhance the speak-up culture. However, employees from the operational level perceive the efforts to create new practices as lacking the point of view from employees.

To conclude the last part of the research question: enhancing a speak-up culture using the whistleblowing framework, commitment from the top and formal communication from the company, can be of significant impact for the company. There is a clear need for more genuine and visible dedication from top management, along with well-thought-out formal communication using information and active participation from employees at the more operational level.

I won't say that this answer is the one and only answer as it is constructed of perceptions from people I talked with during the past few months. This study could encompass a deeper and more complete understanding of the speak-up culture in the company when an ethnographic study over a longer period of time, for example during a year, would take place. This approach would allow researchers to engage deeply with employees across all levels and sectors, providing a richer and more nuanced perspective on the speak-up culture of the organization. Additionally, future research into the perspectives of employees at the operational level could contribute valuable insights into the best practices for fostering a speak-up culture. By focusing on this group, researchers can enhance existing theories from an employer perspective.

Moreover, I would also recommend exploring intercultural differences in relation to the speak-up culture more deeply. Such studies could potentially uncover significant information in how different cultural backgrounds influence communication practices and attitudes towards feedback, leading to more effective and inclusive approaches to fostering a speak-up culture within multi-cultural workplaces.

Finally, due to the changing societal norms and values surrounding speaking up and ethical standards it is vital to keep developing the knowledge and perceptions about these subjects. Keep exploring, understanding and finding and when found, speak up.

7 Recommendations

When analyzing the conclusion of this study, there are practical recommendations that could be of help for the company that was subject to this study specifically and generally for other organizations to foster and improve their speak-up culture.

For improving the general feeling of psychological safety in a company it would be beneficial to create an environment where providing and receiving feedback can coexist with a high level of trust. This can be done by organizing feedback sessions every month or so during a team meeting. It could be helpful to empower employees with tools and ways of giving feedback to ensure constructive feedback. There are different studies and theories that have proven to be effective tools to use for giving and receiving feedback (Jug et al., 2019). In order to welcome constructive feedback it could be helpful to provide teams with a conflict style test which helps them in knowing their communication style when having discussions. There are different conflict style tests which provide an insight in how people act during conflicts, for example the one from Kilmann (2024).

Secondly, it is important to recognize and stay critical when it comes to power relations. It can be difficult to do something with it, because these relations will always exist. What can be done is a critical reflection on how these power relations influence actions. For managers and other leaders it is important to stay critical and keep reflecting on these relations. Power relations can't be avoided, but managers need to be power sensitive to understand how these could influence other employees and to avoid negative consequences. Next to being power sensitive to foster a culture of trust and openness, it is crucial for managers to ensure their actions align with their intentions. Regular engagement with employees and addressing practical challenges are essential steps to show genuine care for a speak-up culture. Showing up and showing interest in employees enhances approachability of managers. It is also important to understand and incorporate employees' perspectives in decision-making processes. This can bridge the gap between management intentions and employee perceptions of these intentions. Training programs for leaders should emphasize the importance of approachability, empathy, and active listening to enhance the speak-up culture.

Moreover, in order to make employees feel more heard and to use more perspective in making new plans, the organization could include more operational level employees in the process of

developing new practices. This might include organizing brainstorming sessions, focus groups, and workshops, providing employees with the opportunity to share their ideas and concerns directly with management. Additionally, implementing a suggestion box can be beneficial, not only for collecting anonymous feedback, but also for allowing employees to observe the follow-ups and actions taken based on their suggestions.

Furthermore, speaking up can be about making yourself vulnerable. This study shows it can be difficult to make yourself vulnerable while working, because it might be perceived as you being weak. What is not helpful in these situations is the use of speaking up as a joke, which can make it even more scary to speak up. It can be helpful to change the stigma surrounding speaking up explaining how it helps and that it can be challenging but is a strong choice. This study shows that there is a need from employees to better publicize formal channels for raising concerns.

Next to this, establishing a common goal and shared purpose surrounding a speak-up culture is crucial for overcoming cultural barriers. By aligning everyone towards the same set of practices, it becomes easier to foster a more inclusive speak-up culture that transcends cultural differences. This alignment helps create a sense of unity and understanding amongst the international business units. For employees working in the international context of the company, being interculturally sensitive helps in fostering a more inclusive environment. There are different sources and theories that can help in becoming more interculturally sensitive (Brinkmann & Van Weerdenburg, 2014; Dziatzko et al., 2017). Next to this, in order to get an insight into how interculturally sensitive these employees are right now, it can be valuable to do the Intercultural Readiness Check (2024).

At last, it is important to note that not everyone shares the same values. Due to the mission of the company of this study, most employees seem to assume that they are like minded people. However, not sharing the exact same values is not a bad thing. It can be helpful talking about it instead of assuming everyone thinks the same. One of the respondents used the example of a game in which dilemma's were laid out. This showed that everyone assumed people would choose the same answers, but in reality this differed a lot. Games about norms and values can help to expose these differences in a playful and constructive way. Attachment 8 of this study shows a game about speak-up culture. This game is created based on this study. This is an

example of a playful way in which employees can talk and think about speak-up culture with each other.

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Attachments

1. Engaged fieldwork report at TI-NL

My time at Transparency International Nederland began with a warm welcome in which I got to meet other interns and the different programs and projects that they are working on. The NGO has a lot of different requests, but only so many hands. I learned how hardworking the people involved in the organization are and how they were situated in the Dutch democracy network being part of different groups and networks.

Together with another intern I worked on the new Whistleblowing Frameworks rapport.

During my time at the organization they also existed for 25 years for which a celebration was held including a dinner and reading from a Dutch professor specialized in democracy. I helped in organizing this. I also got the chance to help with the workshops TI-NL provided at the National Day for Detection. During this workshop the table that I made for describing the relations of the concepts central to this study was used in the presentation. These practical activities helped me in developing myself in a more professional way and they showed me how important the topic of this study is in reality.

2. Topic list

Speak-up culture

Psychological Safety

Fear

Trust

Taking social risks

Power relations (SDO)

Ethical climate

Corporate Culture

Perceptions of 'good' and 'bad'

Company as moral actor

Ethical leadership

Whistleblowing Framework

Commitment from the top

Formal communication company

3. How to Create a Safe Space Toolkit



SUPPORT MATERIAL

Ways to handle deep emotions that surface

Credit: Raising Voices/JASS facilitator workshop 201)

Strategies to responding to deep emotion need to be planned for and be able to be activated when deep emotion arises. Facilitator must acknowledge the value of safe space and inevitability of emotion; see it as part of the work and necessary for our activism.

- **Acknowledge** the deep pain and sharing - make sure the participant knows you are hearing them (e.g. make eye contact and if appropriate physical contact; repeat what they are saying and acknowledge it).
- After a few minutes, introduce a **grounding** exercise - bringing the group together (e.g. breathing, holding hands, etc.).
- Ask group if they have anything to **offer back** to the people who shared - (e.g. I really appreciate your sharing; I think your mother must have been a really strong woman) **BUT** make sure no new stories!
- **Processing** - Next the facilitator must link what has been shared back to our activism and our struggle for social change; speak to how deep emotion motivates us and moves us to act.
- Positive note - a song or something **uplifting** - draw on the skills of co-facilitators and participants.
- **Move on** in the process - ask if that is okay; accept some people may need to leave the space and if possible do the next activity in a different space at the venue.
- **Follow-up** - individual follow-up and provision of external support resources if necessary.

4. Informed Consent form



INFORMED CONSENT

For participation educational research

Speak Up Culture

Whistleblowing and the importance of whistleblowers have garnered increasing attention in recent years. Employees serve as crucial sources for identifying corruption, misconduct, and other wrongdoing. There are various benefits to providing effective whistleblowing frameworks. For instance, whistleblowers' reports can prevent liabilities and financial losses, promote organizational improvement, and support an open and just organizational culture.

Several studies have been conducted on internal whistleblowing arrangements, such as an earlier report by Transparency International Netherlands (Whistleblowing Frameworks 2019). This involved comprehensive research into all rules, procedures, and the culture surrounding whistleblowing. The result of this report revealed that with an average score of only 31%, companies scored the lowest on the dimension of organizational culture, the Speak-up culture. Do employees feel comfortable and safe enough to report misconduct? A culture surrounding people within an organization, in this case, a sense of comfort and safety to speak up, cannot be measured solely with quantitative data. Therefore, the aim of this research is to examine the speak-up culture within an organization. To gain further insights into the culture and to assist the company in understanding this culture, in-depth qualitative research can be beneficial. This information can aid in the ongoing development of the code of conduct and potentially uncover new important insights.

It is important to note that the name of the company will not be mentioned in the research, and all respondents will remain anonymous in the study.

I have been informed about the research. I have read the written information. I have been given the opportunity to ask questions about the research. I have had the opportunity to

consider my participation in the research, and it is entirely voluntary. I have the right to withdraw the consent I provide at any time and to discontinue my participation in the research without giving reasons.

I agree to participate in the research:

I consent to the recording of the interview and the anonymous use of quotes in the research report.

Name:

Signature:

Date:

The undersigned, responsible researcher, hereby declares that the individual named above has been orally and in writing informed about the research mentioned above.

.Name: Anke de Groot

5. Set-up Semi structured Interview

Before starting this interview it is important to note that all answers will be confidential and that your name and the name of the company will not be named in the study.

1. *What is your role in this organization?*
2. *For how long are you already working at NAME COMPANY*

➤ **Photo's:**

Make 2 or more pictures of places or objects in / surrounding the company you work at where you feel safe or unsafe to speak up. This can also be places that you relate to certain situations or pictures of objects that relate to your work and the feeling to speak your mind.

Tell me about the pictures

- *Why did you choose this picture?*
- *In what way do you think this place/object is for you related to speaking up? (or the opposite)*
- *Do you have a concrete example or experience surrounding this picture?*

Speak-up culture

- Psychological Safety
3. *How does the communication in your team work?*
 4. *In which way do you give each other feedback?*
 5. *Do you feel like your ideas and input are valued?*
 - Fear
 6. *What would you do if you saw someone doing something wrong during work?*
 7. *Do you have experience with this?*
 - Power relations
 8. *What makes it difficult to talk about or speak up about things in the organization?*
 9. *What is the role of management in this?*
 10. *What are your experiences with regards to power relations in the organization?*
 - Trust
 11. *Are there persons surrounding you during your work that you trust and feel safe to talk to when something is happening? (Manager/confidant?)*

- Taking social risks

12. In your opinion, what does it mean to take social risks within your organization?

13. Can you describe a time when you or someone else took a social risk to address an issue?

Ethical climate in relation to the speak-up culture

- Corporate Culture & Perceptions of 'good' and 'bad' & Company as moral actor

14. How would you describe the corporate culture here?

15. Are there certain ethical standards and behaviors that are important here?

16. Do you think the organization fosters an ethical environment where people can speak-up about everything?

- Ethical leadership

17. Regarding leadership in the company, do you feel like people who take on a leadership role in the organization operate coherent to the ethical standards?

Whistleblowing Framework

- Commitment from the top & Formal communication company

18. Do you perceive management to take a safe speak-up culture and all rules and procedures that come with it seriously? (Examples?)

19. From your perspective, what improvements could be made to the existing structures to encourage a safe environment in which speaking up and whistleblowing takes place?

We have now reached the end of the interview. Are there any final thoughts you would like to share or do you have any questions for me regarding this research?

6. Color Practice

Participation Educational Research: Speak-up Culture

Dear Employee,

*For an educational research concerning the Speak-up culture of this company, I kindly ask you to take a look at this map and try to fill it in where you see fit. The goal of this research is to find out more about how the employees perceive and feel about the speak-up culture at work. **It is important to note that the name of the company will not be mentioned in the research, and all respondents will remain anonymous in the study.***

A speak-up culture is about sharing ideas with someone with the knowledge that this person might devote attention or resources to take action on this. A good speak-up cultures helps with company innovation and a shared sense of safety and trust.

The color practice:

On the white sheet several concepts are written down. The different colored stickers stand for different feelings surrounding these concepts. Try to put a sticker where your feeling with the concept fit. You don't have to fill in all the concepts only the ones you want to put a color on.

The colors mean the following:

- Red: Safe
- Blue: Fearful
- Green: Trust
- Yellow: Risky / taking a risk
- White: Other

Thank you for your help and sharing your knowledge, your input here is very helpful!

Want to know more about the research or share your thoughts when you put on the white sticker? You can always contact me on: A.degroot@transparency.nl

7. Results Color Practice Poster



8. Speak-up Game

Speak-up or forever hold your peace

Serious game to practice with - and think about Speak-up culture

Goal of this game:

To understand and appreciate different perspectives within an organization regarding speak-up culture. Players will take on various roles within the organization and discuss hypothetical situations from those viewpoints.

Materials Needed:

1. Role Cards: Cards describing different roles within the organization (e.g., Manager, Employee, HR Representative, Team Leader).
2. Situation Cards: Cards describing various scenarios related to speak-up culture.

Let's start:

1. Shuffle the Role Cards and the Situation Cards separately.
2. Ensure there are enough Role Cards for all players. If there are more players than roles, create duplicate role cards.
3. Arrange the players in a circle.

Game Play:

1. Draw Role Cards: Each player draws one Role Card. This card represents the perspective they will take during the discussion of the scenario.

2. Draw a Situation Card: One player draws a Situation Card and reads it aloud to the group. The situation will describe a scenario related to speak-up culture (e.g., an employee witnessing unethical behavior, a suggestion for process improvement being ignored, etc.).

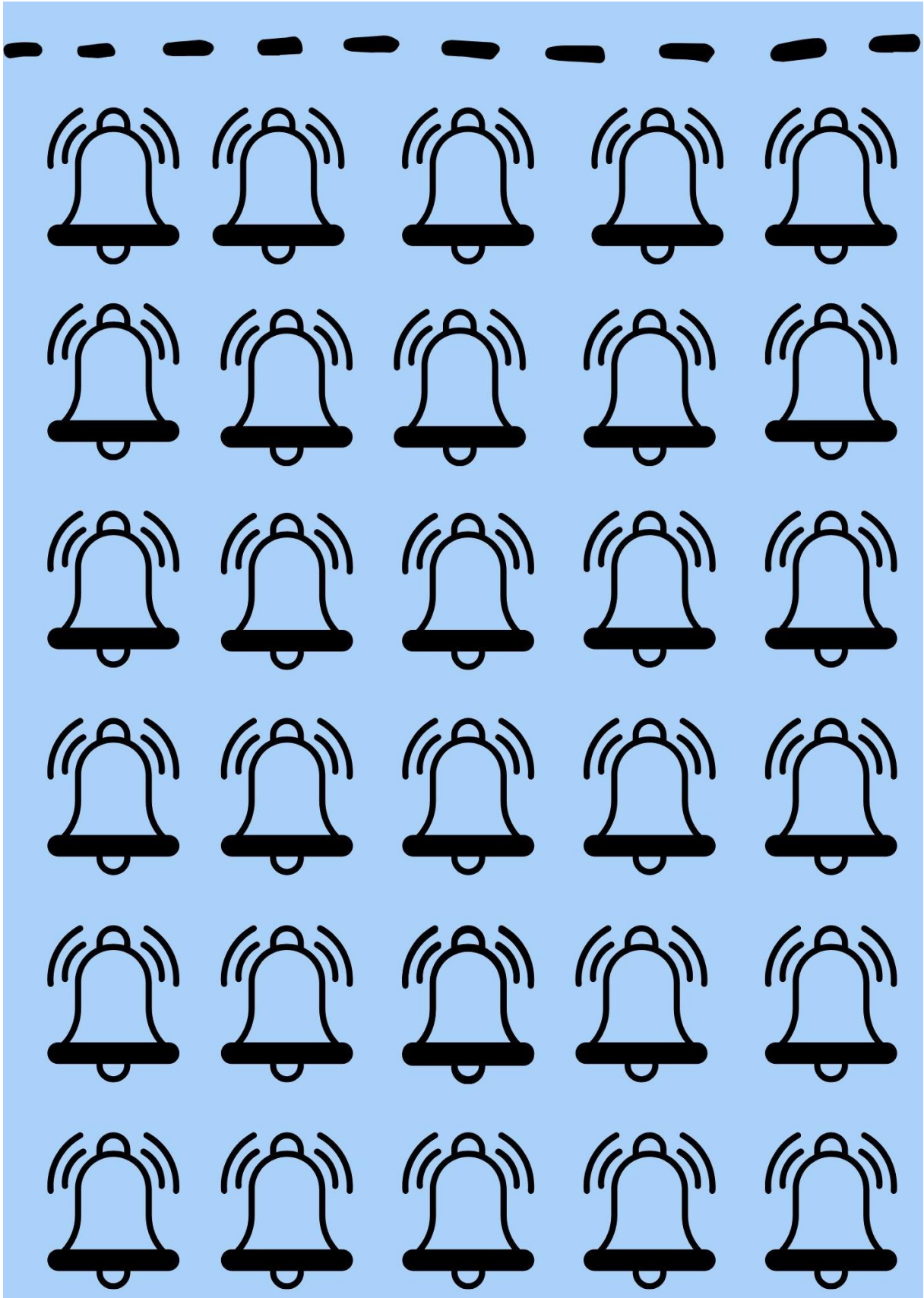
3. Discussion: Each player, in turn, discusses the situation from the perspective of their role. Encourage players to consider:

- How their role might perceive the situation.
- What actions their role might take.
- Any potential conflicts or challenges their role might face in this scenario

4. Rotate Role Cards: After the discussion, the Role Cards are shuffled again and each player takes on a new role for the next situation their Role Card to the player on their left. This ensures that each player experiences multiple perspectives throughout the game.

Ending the Game:

The game ends when different situations from different perspectives have been talked about. After the game hold a debriefing session where players share their insights from the game.



Role cards

Manager: Responsible for overseeing a team, ensuring productivity, and handling employee concerns.

Junior Employee: A new general staff member who works under the manager and may face day-to-day operational challenges.

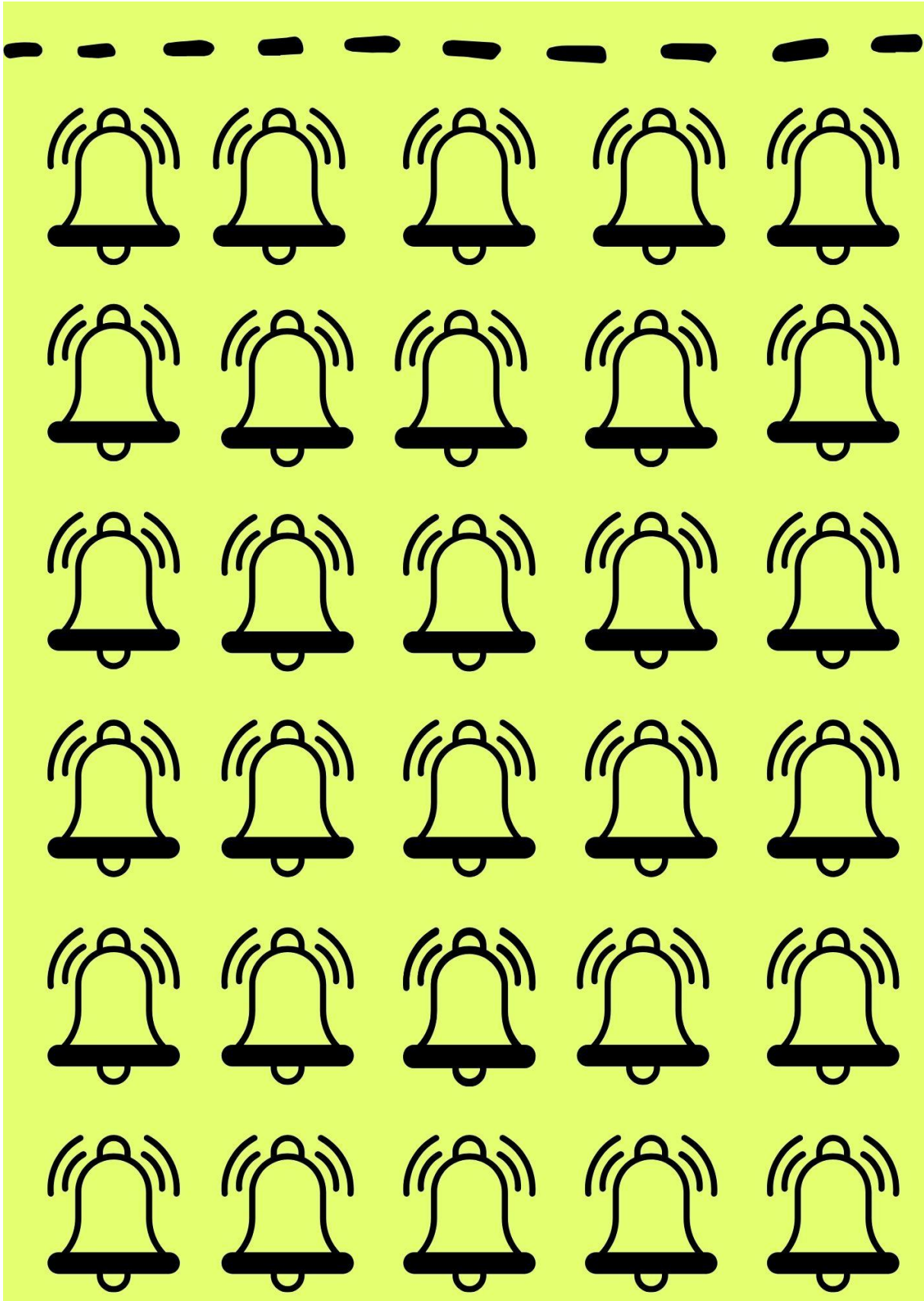
HR Representative: Manages employee relations, handles grievances, and ensures company policies are followed.

Team Leader: Leads a smaller team within the organization, balancing both managerial duties and team dynamics.

Senior Employee: A high experienced general staff member who works under the manager and may face day-to-day operational challenges.

Choose your own role!

Examples:
Facility staff
Receptionist
Close Client



Situations

An employee reports a safety concern that hasn't been addressed for weeks.

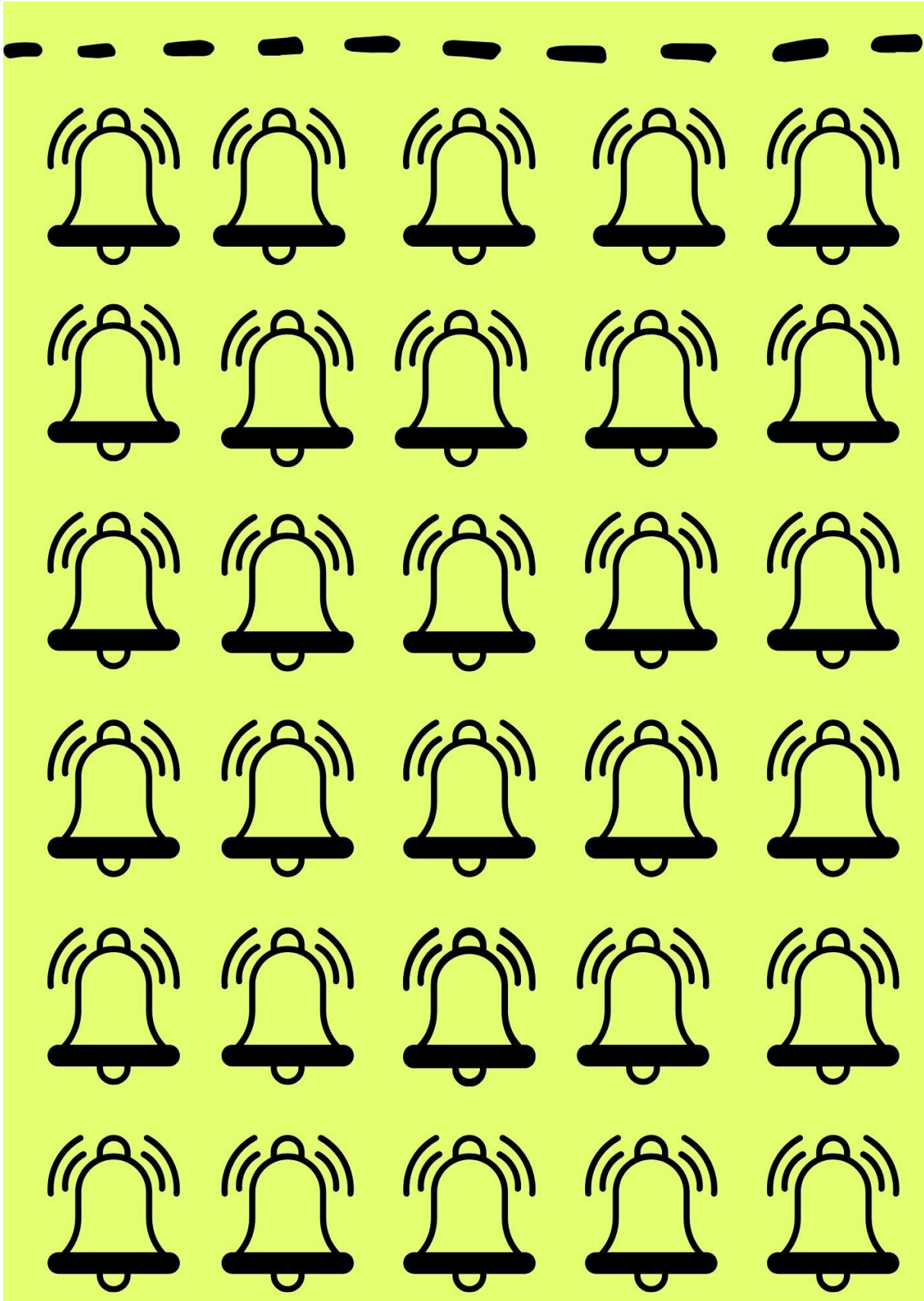
A team member proposes a cost-saving idea that is ignored during meetings.

An employee notices favoritism in how assignments are given out.

A staff member feels uncomfortable with a joke made in the workplace but fears retaliation if they speak up.

Two employees have a personal conflict that is affecting their work and team morale. The manager is aware but has not taken steps to mediate or resolve the issue.

A new team member feels excluded from important team discussions and decisions. They notice that established team members often dismiss their contributions and ideas during meetings.



Situations

An employee feels that their cultural background is not respected or valued within the team. They have noticed a lack of diversity in leadership positions and feel marginalized.

An employee notices that promotions within the department seem to favor a certain group of individuals, regardless of performance. The employee feels that the promotion process is biased but is unsure how to address it.

There is a noticeable disconnection between generations in the team. Norms and values seem to differ due to generational differences, this is in different meetings a problem

An employee has noticed that a senior team member often makes mistakes that affect the entire team's productivity. The employee fears that providing this feedback might lead to a negative reaction or even retaliation from the senior team member.

Think about a situation from your own experience

Think about a situation from your own experience