



Exploring the Culture of Whistleblowing and the Fear of Reprisal in the Federal Public Sector

Final Report

Prepared for the Office of the Public Sector Integrity Commissioner

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March 2022

This public opinion research report presents the results of a set of nine online focus groups conducted with Government of Canada public sector employees. The focus groups took place between March 3 and 10, 2022.

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Executive Summary

The Office of the Public Sector Integrity Commissioner of Canada (PSIC) commissioned Phoenix Strategic Perspectives (Phoenix SPI) to conduct qualitative public opinion research (POR) to explore the culture of whistleblowing and the fear of reprisal in the federal public sector.

1. Research purpose and objectives

The purpose of this qualitative research was to provide PSIC with a clearer understanding of public servants' views on whistleblowing and reprisal. The objectives of this research were to: explore attitudes towards the reporting of wrongdoing within the federal public sector; identify the factors participants would consider when deciding whether to report wrongdoing; explore concerns related to the reporting of wrongdoing, including the fear of reprisal; assess participants' awareness and knowledge of PSIC; and learn more about how best ways to communicate information about the federal whistleblowing regime.

2. Methodology

Nine virtual focus group sessions were conducted between March 3-10, 2022, with federal government employees. Five groups were conducted with non-management employees and four groups with executives and managers (EX and EX minus 1). Participants were drawn from a mix of federal departments and agencies and represented a mix of job functions and regions of the country.

3. Limitations and Use of the Research Results

This research was qualitative. Qualitative research is designed to reveal a rich range of opinions and interpretations rather than to measure what percentage of the target population holds a given opinion. As such, the results indicate federal public servants' views about the issues explored, but they cannot be generalized to the full population. With the foregoing in mind, the results of this research will be used by PSIC to inform communications strategies and products used to educate public servants about the federal whistleblowing regime.

4. Key Findings and Recommendations

Top-of-mind considerations about whistleblowing in the public service most often related to possible reprisals and negative repercussions.

Participants collectively identified a variety of considerations that come to mind as public servants when they think about whistleblowing in the public service. The possibility of potential reprisals for whistleblowing, however, was the most commonly identified consideration, with participants using expressions including 'retaliation', 'retribution', and 'negative consequences'; sometimes these expressions were preceded by the phrase 'fear of ...'. The potential repercussions of whistleblowing were also frequently identified by participants. Examples included a negative impact on the physical or psychological well-being of the whistleblower, lack of support or back-up, the whistleblower acquiring a reputation as a 'troublemaker', diminished trust and division among co-workers, as well as damage to the image or reputation of the public service.

When it came to their own attitude towards whistleblowing in the public service, there was a widespread perception that whistleblowers are brave individuals who are not adequately supported nor protected when making a disclosure. Underscoring this impression was a sense of cynicism, scepticism, and disillusionment regarding the process of reporting wrongdoing and the likely outcome. There was an almost equally widespread attitude that whistleblowers should be encouraged and supported, and that claims of wrongdoing should be investigated when reported by public servants. At the same time, participants emphasized that potential whistleblowers need to understand what they are facing in terms of the disclosure process and procedures, with many describing the process of investigating wrongdoing as long, arduous, stressful, and uncertain as to the outcome.

Participants said their attitude towards whistleblowing in the public service has changed over time. In addition, there was a widespread impression among participants that things have changed concerning whistleblowing over the course of their own career in the federal public service.

Many participants said their attitude towards whistleblowing in the public service has changed over time. In describing how their attitude has changed, participants described themselves as having ‘become less naïve’, ‘more pessimistic’, ‘more cynical’, ‘more jaded’, ‘less bright eyed’, and ‘more disillusioned’ about the process of reporting wrongdoing. Some described themselves as having become ‘more reluctant’, ‘more cautious’, and ‘more sceptical’ about reporting a wrongdoing, or more likely to consider whether something is worth reporting given the negative impact this could have on their career.

Not only did many participants report changes in their attitude toward whistleblowing, they also felt that things have changed concerning whistleblowing over the course of their own career in the federal public service. Specifically, there is much more awareness-raising and education, as well as official measures or procedures in place to support and facilitate whistleblowing. That said, many held the view that such changes amount to ‘virtue signalling’ or ‘window dressing’ as opposed to constituting real cultural change in the acceptability of whistleblowing in the workplace environment.

Participants identified a range of factors or considerations which would encourage or motivate them to report wrongdoing, sufficient evidence or certainty of wrongdoing, the perceived severity of the wrongdoing, and trust in one’s manager (among employees).

Factors or considerations which would encourage or motivate participants to report wrongdoing tended to fall into three categories: factors relating to the nature of the wrongdoing, factors related to procedures for reporting wrongdoing, and factors related to the work environment or culture. Factors related to the nature of the wrongdoing included having definite proof or certainty of wrongdoing, the perceived severity of the supposed wrongdoing, and whether there were other witnesses to support or corroborate the claim. Factors related to the processes and procedures of reporting a wrongdoing included guaranteed anonymity to protect against possible reprisals and negative repercussions in the workplace, trust or confidence in the process of investigation, and evidence that wrongdoers found guilty are punished for wrongdoing. Factors related to the work environment included a work culture that supports and encourages whistleblowing and, among employees, trust or confidence that their manager would support and guide them if approached about potential wrongdoing.

Fear of reprisals is the most frequently identified concern or apprehension about reporting a wrongdoing that may have been committed within the federal public sector. Not only is fear of reprisals the top concern associated with reporting a wrongdoing, it is also a real concern according to nearly all participants.

Participants identified a variety of concerns about reporting a wrongdoing, but the most frequently identified concern, by far, was fear of reprisals. Indeed, this concern was identified by participants in every group. Concerns identified less frequently included *negative repercussions in the work environment, negative impact on one's mental and/or physical health and personal life, the impression that nothing will change if one reports wrongdoing, the time and effort that needs to be invested in the reporting of wrongdoing, and doubt/lack of certainty that a wrongdoing has occurred, among others.*

Nearly all participants said that fear of reprisals for reporting a wrongdoing is a real concern, and one that cannot be eliminated altogether as a concern when reporting wrongdoing. Even before being asked about this explicitly, the issue of reprisals had been raised and discussed in all groups. Routinely identified examples of types of reprisals included impeded career progression and poor evaluations, being taken off projects or not assigned to special projects, being assigned less challenging work or an increased workload, having one's work increasingly scrutinized, having one's reputation tarnished by being labelled as untrustworthy, and being shunned by other employees.

Awareness of PSIC and the role it plays when it comes to reporting wrongdoing and reprisals in the federal public service is limited.

Just over half the participants indicated that they were unaware of the Office of the Public Sector Integrity Commissioner of Canada prior to being contacted for this study. Managers were only slightly more likely to be aware of PSIC than non-managers. Those aware of PSIC's existence had limited knowledge of its role when it comes to reporting wrongdoing and reprisals in the federal public service. In fact, most said they did not know what PSIC's role was in this regard. Those who could identify a role spoke generally about PSIC being a third-party, independent, arm's length organization that investigates cases of wrongdoing. When asked how they would describe their own level of knowledge of existing reporting mechanisms for protected disclosure and reprisal protection, most participants described it as low or limited. Those who described their level of knowledge as 'moderate' or 'good' were all managers, and their characterization was based on experience or involvement with existing reporting procedures.

Most participants, including most managers, said they do not have the information and resources they need to deal with issues of whistleblowing and protection from reprisals.

When it came to how PSIC could better communicate about the regime in place for dealing with whistleblowing, the focus was on a more personal approach. This included humanizing the process by focusing on storytelling (i.e., showing someone going through the process and addressing their potential concerns, fears and apprehensions with empathy); trying to instill confidence in the procedures/process, especially regarding protection of confidentiality and fear of reprisals; and having messaging delivered by the Commissioner so public servants feel they are being addressed directly, in a personal manner by the person at the head of PSIC. When it came to how to convey that reprisals are taken seriously, participants most often suggested that PSIC focus its messaging on the Agency's track record by emphasizing positive outcomes, success stories, and consequences faced by wrongdoers.

Participants offered many suggestions when it comes whistleblowing and reprisal for PSIC's consideration. They are presented here in the form of recommendations or considerations for PSIC, with the understanding that some, or many, of these may already have been implemented or considered by PSIC.

- Changes to work culture were often mentioned by participants as being needed to encourage reporting of wrongdoing and address fear of reprisals. While changes to the federal public service work culture clearly fall outside the mandate of PSIC, participants did offer targeted suggestions, some of which could potentially be addressed by PSIC and may serve to facilitate change to work culture. These include:
 - *Training related to whistleblowing/reporting wrongdoing.* PSIC could develop a training module that deals specifically with the roles and responsibilities of managers and employees related to reporting wrongdoing.
 - *Reward, acknowledge, recognize whistleblowers.* To raise awareness of whistleblowing and normalize it as an acceptable part of work culture, PSIC might consider the role of champions (i.e., having a small number of whistleblowing champions in selected departments and agencies who can serve as a focal point and information resource for public servants).
- To address concerns related to anonymity when reporting a wrongdoing, some participants suggested an external, independent organization for investigating issues of wrongdoing in the federal public service. This suggestion points to a lack of awareness of PSIC and reinforces the need to raise the profile of PSIC among federal public servants. In addition to the suggestions above regarding work culture, both of which can be expected to promote the Agency and increase understanding of whistleblowing, PSIC could reach federal public servants through departmental intranets or infozones. Communications could focus on sharing information on how confidentiality is maintained during the reporting process, and how whistleblowers are protected from reprisals. These communiqués could be delivered at regular intervals (e.g., quarterly) or in conjunction with other issues (e.g., privacy protection, harassment and discrimination, diversity and inclusion) that receive focus throughout the year.
- When it comes to how PSIC could better communicate about the regime in place for dealing with whistleblowing, participants suggested that the focus be less procedural and more humanized in terms of content and delivery. PSIC could consider using more storytelling to convey information to public servants. This could include showcasing success stories or showing someone going through the process with a focus on addressing their potential concerns and fears.

This is not intended as an exhaustive list of suggestions for PSIC. Instead, the focus is on a small number of suggestions related to key conclusions from the research, which include: the need for a shift in work culture to encourage reporting of wrongdoing; public servants fear reprisals because they do not trust that the reporting process will guarantee their anonymity; and public servants want to see success stories and information that focuses on the human impact of reporting to increase trust in the system.

5. Contract Value

The contract value was \$68,108.59 (including applicable tax).

6. Statement of Political Neutrality

I hereby certify as a Senior Officer of Phoenix Strategic Perspectives that the deliverables fully comply with the Government of Canada political neutrality requirements outlined in the *Communications Policy* of the Government of Canada and Procedures for Planning and Contracting Public Opinion Research. Specifically, the deliverables do not contain any reference to electoral voting intentions, political party preferences, standings with the electorate, or ratings of the performance of a political party or its leader.

AWoods

Alethea Woods
President
Phoenix Strategic Perspectives Inc.

Introduction

Phoenix Strategic Perspectives (Phoenix SPI) was commissioned by the Office of the Public Sector Integrity Commissioner of Canada (PSIC) to conduct qualitative public opinion research (POR) to explore the culture of whistleblowing and the fear of reprisal in the federal public sector.

Background and Objectives

The *Public Servants Disclosure Protection Act* (the Act) came into force in April 2007 and, as a result, the Office of the Public Sector Integrity Commissioner of Canada (PSIC) was created. PSIC is responsible for administering the external whistleblowing regime under the Act. The regime provides for a confidential method for public servants and members of the public to make protected disclosures of wrongdoing. In addition, the regime also provides a mechanism for public servants and former public servants to make reprisal complaints, should they believe they have suffered reprisal because they made a protected disclosure or cooperated in an investigation by PSIC.

In [2011](#) and [2015](#), PSIC conducted focus group research to gain a better understanding of perceptions related to the whistleblowing regime of the federal public sector. The findings from both studies suggested that federal public servants are concerned about reprisals, stigmatization or ostracization, and lack of anonymity in the whistleblowing process. Results from the 2020 Public Sector Employee Survey (PSES) indicated that a proportion of employees continue to fear reprisal, and that this may be holding them back from speaking up when they see or experience something wrong in the workplace.

As part of PSIC's mandate, the Agency works to educate public servants and members of the public about the Act and the external whistleblowing regime. In order to tailor effective and helpful communications products and presentations, PSIC needed a clearer understanding of public servants' views on whistleblowing and reprisal. Qualitative research was conducted with federal public servants to support PSIC's organizational priority of informing public servants about the Act and PSIC. The objective of this research was to explore factors that contribute to the fear of reprisal and identify measures that could be taken to address and minimize fear of reprisal.

By better understanding public servants' views about whistleblowing and reprisal, PSIC will be able to better communicate with public servants about the whistleblowing regime. Results will inform communications strategies and products used to educate public servants about the federal whistleblowing regime. In addition, the research findings will be used to assist PSIC and public sector employees involved with aspects of the disclosure regime within the federal public sector develop approaches to help create a workplace that respects the importance of whistleblowing and the freedom to do so without reprisal.

Methodology

A set of nine online focus groups were conducted with Government of Canada public sector employees between March 3 and 10, 2022. Four groups¹ were held with management (EX and EX

¹ The response to the recruitment invitation email was not sufficient to support five groups. For this reason, the design was amended to reduce the number of management groups to four.

minus 1) and five groups were held with non-management employees (EX minus 2 and below). In total, 64 federal public servants participated in the research: 41 non-management employees and 23 managers. The following specifications applied to the research:

- One group with each audience was conducted in French, and the remainder were conducted in English.
- Groups were segmented by region of the country to accommodate different time zones.
 - One non-management employee group was conducted with public servants working in each of the following regions: 1) Ontario (including the National Capital Region); 2) Atlantic Canada; 3) the Prairies; 4) British Columbia; and 5) Quebec (including French-speaking employees who work in the rest of Canada).
 - Management groups were conducted as follows: 1) managers working in Ontario (including the National Capital Region) or Atlantic Canada; 2) those working in Manitoba, Saskatchewan, Alberta, or British Columbia; 3) those working in any province across the country; 4) those working in Quebec (including French-speaking managers from outside of Quebec).
- There was a mix of participants by:
 - Functional area, including administration, operations, program, finance, legal, policy, information technology, communications, regulatory, and human resources, among others.
 - Job responsibilities, including analysts, administrators, translators, officers, advisors, researchers, team leaders, managers, and directors, among others.
 - Department and agency. No participants were recruited from the Canadian Security Establishment, the Canadian Security Intelligence Service, or the Canadian Armed Forces as they are excluded from PSIC's purview.
- Each group lasted up to two hours and was conducted using iTracks realtime research platform.
- Recruitment was undertaken by email and telephone² as follows:
 - Using the Government Electronic Directory Service, acquired via Open Government, a sample frame was created for recruitment purposes. This sample frame reflected a good cross-section of employees (management and non-management) from different regions, departments and agencies, as well as job titles. Employees were sent an invitation email requesting their participation in a focus group. This email, and all communications, were available in both official languages.
 - The email provided information about the study, introduced Phoenix SPI as the firm conducting the research, encouraged participation, and provided the name of a contact person at PSIC who could validate the legitimacy of the study. The message also

² In 2011 and 2015, recruitment was done entirely by telephone. This year, the research was conducted during the global pandemic which resulted in much of the public service working remotely, i.e., being asked by their employer to perform their duties off-site, typically at home, for health and safety reasons. This work environment made it more difficult to reach public servants using office/work telephone numbers. For this reason, email was selected as the method of first contact. While email allowed us to reach public servants, concerns about illegitimate emails (e.g., phishing and spam) prompted phone calls and emails to PSIC to confirm the validity of the research.

included a link to the online screening questionnaire, and a link to a PDF letter signed by the Public Sector Integrity Commissioner on Office letterhead.

- Available in both French and English, the online questionnaire was used to determine eligibility and to collect contact information from those employees eligible and interested in participating.
- The PDF letter, also available in both official languages, was designed to reassure employees who had questions or concerns about participating in the research.
 - Employees who completed the online screening questionnaire and who agreed to be contacted were then reached by telephone to confirm their interest in participating, their eligibility, and their availability for a research session.
- For groups with non-management employees, a total of 10 participants were recruited for seven to eight to show per group. Six to 10 participants attended each group.
- For groups with executives and managers, a total of eight participants were recruited for five to six to show per group. Four to eight participants attended each group.
- Participants were paid an honorarium: non-management employees received \$100, and managers received \$150.
- Recruitment of participants adhered to the Government of Canada's *Standards for the Conduct of Government of Canada Public Opinion Research – Qualitative Research* on recruitment specifications.

Notes to readers

- This research was qualitative in nature, not quantitative. As such, the results provide an indication of participants' views about the issues explored, but cannot be generalized to the full population of federal public servants.
- Findings from the groups with non-management and management employees are reported together, with differences by audience noted throughout the report.
- Similar qualitative research was conducted in 2011 and 2015. Where relevant, this year's findings are compared to those from 2015.
- Appended to this report are the following materials: the validation letter, the recruitment email, the online screening questionnaire, and the moderator's guides.

Detailed Findings

1. Contextual information

Research participants' tenure with the federal public service varied considerably, ranging from less than one year to over 30 years. Despite the range, most participants have been working in the federal public service for at least a decade, and many for two decades or more. The length of time managers have held management positions in the federal public service ranged from one year to over 20 years. That being said, most managers have been in management positions for a decade or more. In the course of their careers in the federal public sector, most participants have worked for more than one department or agency.

2. Attitudes towards 'Whistleblowing'

This section reports on participants' attitudes towards the reporting of wrongdoing within the federal public sector. For the sake of consistency, 'whistleblowing', the commonly used expression to refer to the disclosure of wrongdoing, was used to guide the discussion. The corresponding French expression, 'dénonciation', was used in groups with French-speaking participants.

Variety of things come to mind when thinking about 'whistleblowing' in the public service

Participants collectively identified a variety of considerations that come to mind as public servants when they think about whistleblowing in the public service.³ While various considerations were identified, the same kinds of considerations tended to be identified across groups and audiences (i.e., among managers and employees). These included the following:

- *Possibility/apprehension of reprisals:* The possibility or apprehension of potential reprisals for whistleblowing was the most commonly identified consideration. Indeed, this issue was identified by at least a few participants in every group. Participants used a variety of expressions to refer to this. In addition to 'reprisals', the expressions 'retaliation', 'retribution', and 'negative consequences' were used, sometimes preceded by the phrase 'fear of ...'. Others used expressions such as 'career limiting', 'putting oneself out there' or 'on the line', and 'blowback' to describe potential consequences of whistleblowing. Such apprehensions, it was suggested, deter many employees from coming forward as whistleblowers.
- *Possible repercussions:* The potential repercussions of whistleblowing were also frequently identified by participants as a consideration⁴. Examples of repercussions included a negative impact on the physical or psychological well-being of the whistleblower, lack of support or back-up, the whistleblower being shunned or acquiring a reputation as a 'troublemaker' (something that can follow them for years), a negative or 'chill effect' on the work environment, including diminished trust and division among co-workers, as well as damage to the image or reputation of the public service.

³ The focus was on what participants tend to think about when they think of whistleblowing, not the meaning of the expression itself.

⁴ Participants did not always make a clear conceptual distinction between 'reprisals' and 'repercussions'. While both refer to potential impacts of whistleblowing, repercussions refer to any negative consequences which may result from whistleblowing, while reprisals refer specifically to a deliberate or willful attempt to retaliate against a whistleblower.

- *Process-related issues:* Considerations related to the process of reporting wrongdoing also routinely came to the mind of participants. Various considerations were identified in this regard, but emphasis was most often placed on a perceived lack of support for whistleblowers, particularly in relation to maintaining their anonymity. Other process-related considerations included the following:

- The impression that the process is long, involved, and stressful.
- The impression that the burden of proof is very high.
- The perception that little, if anything, changes as a result of the process (i.e., wrongdoers are rarely punished).
- Doubts about the impartiality of the process and possible conflicts of interest based on who investigates the reported wrongdoing.

Such considerations were identified by all participants, but they were more likely to be emphasized by managers.

- *When to report wrongdoing:* A number of participants tend to consider or think about the conditions or circumstances under which they *should* or *would* report wrongdoing, e.g., the extent to which there is clear and sufficient evidence of wrongdoing, as well as the seriousness of the wrongdoing.⁵
- *Whistleblowing as a dilemma:* Some participants described whistleblowing as a dilemma because it raises the basic question: what is the right thing to do? Specific considerations in this regard included the following:
 - Principle vs. workplace culture: Although whistleblowing is supported ‘in principle’ in the federal public service, it was suggested that the reality is that it still has negative connotations in the workplace culture where it is frowned upon as ‘rocking the boat’, ‘making waves’, or ‘airing dirty laundry’.
 - Obligation vs. loyalty: In principle, whistleblowing is the right thing to do because there is an obligation/duty to disclose wrongdoing when one sees it. On the other hand, employees do not want to be seen as disloyal or troublemakers, particularly if they are less than certain about what they might be reporting as wrongdoing.
- *A double-edged sword:* Whistleblowing can be a double-edged sword to the extent that it can be used to report legitimate wrongdoing, but it can also be used unjustly or vindictively to settle a score or grudge. In this regard, it was suggested that there may be cases where a charge of wrongdoing may have more to do with poor management than actual wrongdoing. Specifically, it may be the ultimate result of a workplace issue a manager should have been attuned to and addressed.

Experience and anecdotal evidence – Main reasons informing considerations that come to mind

Participants most often identified their own experience or things they had heard or read as the reason why they tend to think about or focus on the kinds of considerations identified above. Things they have heard or read included anecdotal evidence (e.g., from friends, colleagues) as well as

⁵ Such considerations are explored fully at the beginning of section 4 under the heading ‘Encouragements/motivations to report a wrongdoing’.

things they have seen, heard, or read in the media. A few referred to research or data/information on whistleblowing as the source of their considerations.

Attitude towards ‘whistleblowing’ in the public service tend to be nuanced

Participants’ attitudes towards whistleblowing tended to be nuanced as opposed to categorically positive or negative. Such attitudes included the following, which were evident across the groups.

- There was a widespread perception that whistleblowers are public servants who tend to be courageous, principled, and animated by a sense of integrity. Respect for whistleblowers was combined with an equally widespread impression that, when they come forward, they are not adequately supported nor protected against possible reprisals. This resulted in a sense of cynicism, scepticism, and disillusionment regarding the process of reporting wrongdoing. Specifically, there was a general feeling among participants that whistleblowers are more likely to suffer negative consequences than the wrongdoers.
- There was an almost equally widespread attitude that whistleblowers should be encouraged and supported, and that claims of wrongdoing should be investigated when reported. However, at the same time, potential whistleblowers need to understand what they are facing in terms of the disclosure process and procedures. This was emphasized by both managers and employees who described the process of investigating wrongdoing as long, arduous, stressful, and uncertain as to the outcome.

As a result of these attitudes, some participants emphasized that they support or commend whistleblowing, but explained that they understand why someone would be reluctant to step forward as a whistleblower. In particular, some managers described themselves as sensitive to, or apprehensive about, what employees are getting into if they come forward to report wrongdoing. While they consider it a duty to report wrongdoing when it happens, they harbour apprehensions about anyone deciding to go forward because it is a complex, long, stressful process in which fears of reprisal, of not being believed, and of not succeeding are justified and have to be recognized. As a result, it was noted that it is difficult to be judgmental if someone is reluctant to report wrongdoing.

In addition:

- Some explained their attitude by observing that reporting of wrongdoing is a good thing in principle, but that it is important to keep in mind that an issue may be complex and that what is perceived as wrongdoing may not be that straightforward or unproblematic.
- A few described their attitude to whistleblowing by characterizing it as a double-edged sword. Just as whistleblowers can be unjustly depicted as malcontents and troublemakers, whistleblowing can be used unjustly and vindictively by falsely accusing someone in pursuit of settling a personal grievance.
- A few described their attitudes as mixed or conflicted in the sense that, while it is important to consider the integrity of the public service (which perhaps should take precedence over other considerations), they cannot help also thinking about being a team player/loyalty and being reticent about the prospect of being considered a ‘snitch’, ‘troublemaker’ or ‘malcontent’.

3. 'Whistleblowing' Over Time and the Impact of the Pandemic

This section reports on participants' impressions of how, if at all, their attitudes towards whistleblowing have changed over time, and the extent to which the pandemic has had an impact on whistleblowing.

Many describe their attitude towards whistleblowing as having changed over time

Many participants, at least a few in most groups, said their attitude towards whistleblowing in the public service has changed over time. In describing how their attitude has changed, these participants tended to use a variety of expressions to convey a similar kind of shift in attitude. They described themselves as having 'become less naïve', 'more pessimistic', 'more cynical', 'more jaded', 'less bright eyed', and 'more disillusioned' about the process. Some described themselves as having become 'more reluctant', 'more cautious', 'more sceptical' about reporting a wrongdoing, or more likely to consider whether something is worth reporting given the negative impact this could have on their career.

More awareness and procedures in federal public service about whistleblowing

There was a widespread impression among participants that things have changed concerning whistleblowing over the course of their own career in the federal public service. Specifically, there is much more awareness-raising and education, as well as official measures or procedures in place to support and facilitate whistleblowing. That said, many held the view that such changes amount to 'virtue signalling' or 'window dressing' as opposed to constituting real change in terms of the acceptability of whistleblowing in the workplace environment/culture.

As described by some participants, the federal public sector, in general, is not 'walking its talk' about whistleblowing. While whistleblowing is given credence in principle, it is still not viewed positively in the workplace environment/culture. Expressions like 'circling the wagons' and 'pushback on reporting' were used to describe what still tends to happen when someone decides to report wrongdoing. This difference between the theory and the practice of reporting of wrongdoing was reflected in statements such as 'public servants are encouraged to report wrongdoing, but watch out if you do', and 'where are the positive stories about reporting wrongdoing, where are the departmental whistleblowing champions?'. Comparatively speaking, it was suggested that more real progress has been made in the federal public service regarding harassment and discrimination in the workplace than regarding whistleblowing.

Cautious recognition that the pandemic has had an impact on 'whistleblowing'

While many participants felt that the pandemic had changed certain things regarding 'whistleblowing', they tended to be circumspect about this. In other words, the possible implications regarding whistleblowing were more suggestive than definite. Participants tended to focus on the following issues related to the impact of the pandemic on whistleblowing:

- *Working from home versus working at the office:* Emphasis tended to be placed on possibilities and limitations arising from people working from home/in isolation and interacting virtually/electronically rather than in-person at the office. For example, it was suggested that communication by MS teams, which has become normalized as a result of the pandemic, provides much less opportunity to discuss issues related to whistleblowing. Compared to being

in physical proximity at work where people can gather in person, there is less of a ‘chatter network’ whereby people become aware of what is going on in the workplace. In short, some felt that working from home or ‘in a silo’ likely makes it more difficult to identify or detect wrongdoing, including the capacity to corroborate it through interaction with others.

- *Increased electronic communication:* Some focused on the increase in communication by text/email resulting from the pandemic. On the one hand, it was suggested that working virtually requires that people communicate more by text/email, which could result in more traceability/on the record information that could facilitate whistleblowing, e.g., a virtual paper trail. On the other hand, it was also suggested that people will be more careful about what they include in their electronic communications or conduct certain conversations offline precisely because of the possibility of traceability. This could make it more difficult to find evidence of wrongdoing. In this regard it was suggested that increased electronic communication could be a double-edged sword. It might make it more difficult to detect wrongdoing, but the technology could also allow for an issue to ‘go viral’ if it were detected.
- *Implications on tension in workplace/blowback for reporting:* It was suggested that working from home has changed the inter-personal dynamics that take place when people work in physical proximity/the same location. This might minimize the palpable effect or impact on whistleblowers who have reported a wrongdoing. Specifically, they might be less likely to sense or experience negative repercussions stemming from their actions, e.g., being shunned as they walk down the office hall.
- *Psychological impact of the pandemic:* A few participants focused on the psychological impact of the pandemic. On the one hand, it was suggested that the pandemic has increased the level of stress to such a point that some might not have the same ability to manage it that they had prior to the pandemic. This could increase frustration regarding workplace issues that might make them more likely to report a perceived wrongdoing. On the other hand, it was suggested that a myriad of other ‘life’ issues have increased in importance or taken on priority for people because of the pandemic. As a result, they might be less likely to focus on workplace issues, including possible wrongdoing.
- *Pandemic-related protocols:* It was suggested that differences of opinion related to the pandemic and pandemic-related protocols could have an impact on the likelihood of reporting wrongdoing or reporting on a colleague’s behaviour. The focus here was on public servants who have worked in their usual workplace environment throughout the pandemic, with an emphasis on the possibility of reporting issues related to COVID-19 protocols, e.g., a co-worker not wearing a mask, or not using hand sanitizer, etc.

Managers unanimous that they have role to play in disclosure of wrongdoing

Managers were unanimous that they have a role to play when it comes to the disclosure of wrongdoing. These responsibilities were seen to include the following:

- *Modelling behaviour/being a leader:* This was seen to involve ‘setting the tone’ or ‘stepping up’ when it comes to whistleblowing by making it clear that wrongdoing is taken seriously and will not be tolerated, i.e., there is an obligation to act. This includes raising awareness about wrongdoing by talking about it openly/getting it on the radar screen, as well as leading by example by disclosing wrongdoings of which they are aware.

- *Being approachable on issues related to whistleblowing:* This involves building/fostering an atmosphere in which employees feel comfortable and confident that they can approach their manager regarding such issues. This includes being a sounding board for employees, e.g., being receptive to their claim while assessing the evidence/circumstances, informing them about their options, making them aware of departmental processes/procedures regarding the reporting of wrongdoing, and understanding how to move things forward when and if a report of wrongdoing reaches them.
- *Regarding processes and procedures,* a few managers emphasized that one of their responsibilities is to make sure employees have a clear and realistic understanding of what they are getting into if they decide to engage in whistleblowing, e.g., the time, effort, and stress this can involve. In this regard, it was also observed that managers should stress to employees that they need to be organized or ‘get all their ducks in a row’ if they decide to move forward.

While not identified as a responsibility per se, it was observed that managers should think about or consider what might happen to an employee once a case of whistleblowing moves beyond the purview of the manager, i.e., beyond their ability to support an employee.

Managers talk about whistleblowing

Most managers indicated that wrongdoing in the federal public sector and issues related to it is something they discuss with employees, other managers, or both, in specific contexts, or as a result of specific circumstances. Examples included the following:

- With managers, in the context of internal investigations related to wrongdoing.
- As a result of seeing/hearing reports about wrongdoing/whistleblowing in the news/media.
- In the context of ‘onboarding’, i.e., when new employees joining the department are given basic orientation/information.
- In the context of/when discussing the values and ethics code for the public sector or departmental codes of conduct.

4. Reporting of Wrongdoing

This section presents feedback on issues related to the disclosure of wrongdoing, with a focus on factors participants would consider when deciding whether to report wrongdoing.

Various factors may encourage or motivate reporting a wrongdoing

Participants identified a variety of factors or considerations that would encourage or motivate them to report wrongdoing that may have been committed within the federal public sector. For the most part, employees and managers tended to focus on the same or similar considerations. Such factors tended to fall into three categories: factors relating to the nature of the wrongdoing, factors related to processes and procedures for reporting wrongdoing, and factors related to the work environment or culture. The various factors have been organized under the relevant category.

Factors related to the nature of the wrongdoing

- *Proof/certainty of wrongdoing:* Having definite proof or certainty of wrongdoing was routinely identified as a key, if not the key consideration that would encourage or motivate participants to report wrongdoing. A few participants specified that this factor would limit their likelihood of reporting wrongdoing because such a standard is difficult to meet in cases of wrongdoing. In other words, proving wrongdoing with certainty is very difficult.
- *Perceived severity of the act:* The perceived severity or seriousness of the supposed wrongdoing was also routinely identified as a key, if not the key consideration that would encourage or motivate participants to report wrongdoing. Considerations informing assessments of the severity of an act of wrongdoing included its *frequency*, e.g., is there a pattern of wrongdoing or is it a single incident; the *intention*, e.g., is there malicious intent informing the act; and the *impact or consequences* of the wrongdoing, e.g., how many people has it affected, how has it affected the work environment, how has it affected the reputation of the public service in general, and what are the consequences of not reporting it.

Some participants emphasized that these would be the only two conditions under which they would consider reporting a wrongdoing, i.e., an extremely serious act of wrongdoing of which they had certain proof. This is because of the possible repercussions whistleblowers can face as well as the time and effort that needs to be invested in reporting a wrongdoing.

- *Corroboration/supporting witnesses:* Some said they would be motivated or more motivated to report wrongdoing if there were other witnesses supporting them or corroborating their claim. Such corroboration was occasionally depicted as contributing to the proof or certainty of wrongdoing.

Factors related to processes/procedures

- *Protection of one's identity:* Some participants emphasized that guaranteed anonymity or confidentiality would encourage reporting of wrongdoing, with some noting that this would be protection against possible reprisals and negative repercussions in the workplace.
- *Confidence in the process:* Some identified trust or confidence in the process of investigation as an encouragement to report wrongdoing. This was seen to include a transparent process, administered impartially/objectively by an independent or arms-length organization, and carried out in a timely fashion. While guaranteed anonymity was usually identified as a distinct factor, it was occasionally included as part of having confidence in the process.
- *Evidence of results/consequences for wrongdoers:* Some suggested that, if they had evidence that wrongdoers were found guilty and punished for wrongdoing, they would be more inclined to consider reporting wrongdoing. It was suggested that, unfortunately, it tends to be the whistleblower who suffers negative consequences when it comes to wrongdoing in the public service.

Factors related to the work environment/culture

- *Support/encouragement:* Some participants indicated that they would be more comfortable or more inclined to report wrongdoing if they felt that there was real support and encouragement for whistleblowing in the work culture/environment of the public service in general. It was suggested that this is not the case, that the general attitude is still to discourage whistleblowing so as not to deal with the fallout.

- *Trust in manager:* This factor was identified by some employees who suggested that trust or confidence that their manager would support and guide them if approached about potential wrongdoing would motivate them to report it.

The following factors were identified by a few participants:

- A sense of professional integrity on the basis of which they decide that this is the right thing to do.
- A definite exit plan that could involve retirement, changing careers, leaving the public sector, or changing departments or agencies. The underlying assumption here was that reporting wrongdoing could result in potential reprisals/repercussions, so that the best way to avoid this would be to remove oneself permanently from the specific workplace environment.

Fear of reprisals – Main concern/apprehension about reporting a wrongdoing

Participants identified a variety of concerns about reporting a wrongdoing that may have been committed within the federal public sector, but the most frequently identified concern, by far, was fear of reprisals. Indeed, this concern was identified by participants in every group. According to a few managers, this fear is justified because of what they consider weak whistleblower protection laws in Canada and the fact that management positions are non-unionized in the federal public service.

Concerns identified less frequently included the following⁶:

- *Negative repercussions in the work environment:* This included lack of support from colleagues (e.g., not being believed), an atmosphere of antagonism/tension/resentment negatively impacting the workplace environment, and being shunned and/or labelled as a ‘troublemaker’, ‘malcontent’, or ‘snitch’. Some participants linked this concern directly to the concern about lack of confidentiality/anonymity, i.e., to word getting out about who reported the wrongdoing.
- *Negative impact on one’s mental and/or physical health and personal life:* This was based on the premise that reporting wrongdoing can be a long, arduous, and stressful process and that it makes one susceptible to reprisals and negative repercussions in the workplace. The combination of such factors was seen as having a negative impact on someone’s health and personal life.
- *Impression that nothing will change if one reports wrongdoing:* Just as some suggested that they would be more inclined to consider reporting wrongdoing if wrongdoers were found guilty and punished, it was suggested that a concern about reporting is that doing so will change nothing. This included concern that the wrongdoer would not be punished as well as concern that nothing would change even if they were punished because the work culture still tends to frown upon disclosure of wrongdoing. In short, the basic calculus is: if nothing will change, why go through with it?
- *Time and effort required:* Some identified the amount of time and effort that needs to be invested in the reporting of wrongdoing as something that would concern them or dissuade them from reporting a wrongdoing. A few specified that only a very serious or grievous offense would persuade them to report a wrongdoing given the time and effort required.

⁶ Unless otherwise specified, these concerns were identified by both employees and managers.

- *Lack of proof/certainty:* Just as definite proof or certainty of wrongdoing was something that would encourage or motivate the reporting of wrongdoing, so was doubt/lack of certainty a concern in so doing. This included concerns that what someone interprets as wrongdoing could be interpreted in some other way.
- *Severity of consequences:* For example, could the wrongdoer lose their job over the wrongdoing in question? The premise here was that if there is an impression that the punishment tends to outweigh the crime, there might be less inclination to report wrongdoing.⁷
- *Power imbalance if reporting against a superior:* Participants mentioned that they would be more apprehensive about reporting wrongdoing if it involved a superior because of the power imbalance.

Fear of reprisals – main concern employee might have about reporting wrongdoing to manager

When managers were asked what concerns an employee might have about reporting a wrongdoing to them or bringing it to their attention, they most often identified fear of reprisals. It was suggested that term appointees and individuals at or near the beginning of their careers might be particularly inclined to fear reprisals. Other concerns included the following:

- Fear of not being believed.
- Apprehension about getting a reputation as a troublemaker, associated especially with young people at the beginning of their careers.
- Concern that there is no point in reporting because there will be no consequences.
- Limited evidence/lack of proof.
- Lack of trust in one's manager, specifically suspicion that wrongdoing cannot be taking place without a manager knowing about it.

Considerations when contemplating reporting wrongdoing reflect motivators and concerns vis-à-vis reporting

Asked what they would consider if they were contemplating reporting a wrongdoing, participants tended to re-iterate considerations that would motivate them to report a wrongdoing or cause them concerns about doing so. Considerations included the following, identified by both employees and managers:

- Do I know/understand the channels/procedures/processes I need to follow? In the mind of a few employees, this included consideration of who to go to first, e.g., their manager?, their union?
- Who will be investigating/will those looking into the issue be impartial?
- How severe/serious is the issue/is it worth reporting?
- How strong is the case/how certain am I?
- Are there other witnesses/how much support/back-up do I have?

⁷ It is perhaps worth recalling in this regard that the more widespread opinion among participants was the opposite – that wrongdoers do not tend to be punished or punished severely.

- Who is being accused, e.g., colleague, superior?
- Am I protected/how well am I protected against reprisals/negative repercussions?
- Will my anonymity be maintained?
- What are the consequences of not proceeding?
- What is my job/career status (e.g., am I at the beginning of my career/near retirement; am I permanent, casual, or term?).

Management would advise employees if approached about reporting wrongdoing

Managers were asked the following question:

What if an employee approached you about reporting wrongdoing? Would you advise them to proceed in the same way? If not, why not? What role, if any, would you play in such a situation?

In response, managers focused on what they perceived to be their role in such a situation. Among the things they emphasized were responsibilities previously identified as part of their role as managers when it comes to the disclosure of wrongdoing. These included:

- Being a sounding board for employees by being receptive to their claim while assessing the evidence/circumstances.
- Informing them about their options and making them aware of departmental processes/procedures regarding the reporting of wrongdoing.
- Making clear their, i.e., the manager's, role in terms of moving things forward should the employee decide to proceed with a report of wrongdoing.
- Presenting the employee with a clear picture of the time and effort involved if they decide to proceed with a report of wrongdoing. For a few managers, this included conveying to the employee the possible impact this could have on their health.
- Emphasizing that employees need to be well prepared and organized if they decide to move forward, i.e., gather all their evidence and show a clear understanding/grasp of it.

5. Fear of Reprisals

This section reports on feedback related specifically to the issue of possible reprisals for reporting wrongdoing.

Virtual consensus that fear of reprisals for reporting a wrongdoing is a real concern

Nearly all participants said that fear of reprisals for reporting a wrongdoing is a real concern. Even before being asked about this explicitly, the issue of reprisals had been raised and discussed in all groups. Routinely identified examples of types of reprisals included the following:

- Stunted career development/progression through the absence of promotion or delayed promotion. It was noted in this regard that there are an increasing number of non-advertised positions, which gives upper management more discretionary power regarding promotions.

- Being taken off projects or not assigned to special projects.
- Being assigned less challenging work/files no one else wants.
- Being assigned more work/increased workload.
- Not receiving training.
- Receiving poor work evaluations.
- Increased scrutiny/criticism of one's work.
- Not being renewed (if one is a term appointee).
- Being excluded from meetings/left off email chains.
- Being discredited/having one's reputation tarnished by being labelled as someone who can't be trusted.
- Being shunned by other employees.

It was suggested that reprisals are usually not so brazen or blatant as to involve outright termination, but that this cannot be excluded as a possibility because reprisals might include looking for reasons to terminate a whistleblower (i.e., building a case to terminate a public servant over a longer-term period). It was also acknowledged that reprisals are more likely or real if someone is reporting against a superior.

Given their own impressions, participants were not surprised to learn that in the 2020 iteration of the federal Public Service Employee Survey nearly one-quarter of respondents indicated that they did not agree that they could initiate a formal recourse process (e.g., grievance, complaint, appeal) without fear of reprisal. In fact, some thought the proportion would be higher or expressed surprise that it was not higher.

Asked what they thought might explain these results, participants pointed to a variety of factors that included the following:

- Personal experience/experience of others regarding such actions.
- Workplace culture/environment: While there is a lot of talk about such things, the reality is that the workplace culture is dominated by an attitude that no one should 'rock the boat'. In this regard it was also suggested that employees' impressions about such issues are influenced by the message they feel is communicated from the top, i.e., what the upper echelons think about such actions.
- Lack of trust in supervisors/managers, based on a poor work environment and/or a management style that communicates lack of receptivity to initiating this kind of action. Related to this, it was suggested that initiating such action creates work for managers who, if unreceptive to such actions, may try to retaliate in some way.
- Lack of knowledge of the process, resulting in fear or apprehensions of the unknown.

Most managers believe possible reprisals are as real for them as for non-managers

Most managers believe that concerns about reprisals for reporting wrongdoing are as justified for public servants in management positions, as they are for public servants in non-management

positions. That said, some specified or emphasized that this is especially the case if reporting against a superior. It was also observed that managers are not unionized and so cannot turn to a union for support if they have apprehensions about reprisals.

Many suggestions to lessen concerns about reprisals offered by participants

Participants collectively identified a number of things that could be done within the work culture/workplace environment as well as within the regime for reporting wrongdoing to address/reduce fear of reprisal. These are presented below, organized by theme.

Suggestions related to the work culture/workplace environment

Suggestions regarding what could be done within the work culture or workplace environment most often focused on or emphasized management-related issues. A basic assumption informing many suggestions from managers and employees was that there needs to be a basic change in the work culture/workplace environment resulting in genuine receptivity to and support of whistleblowing. Only in this way will employees feel comfortable/confident reporting wrongdoing. There was a widespread assumption that this kind of change in the work culture/workplace environment requires real 'buy-in' from the top.

Specific suggestions included the following:

- Training for managers on developing leadership skills/how to be a good manager, including training related to whistleblowing/reporting wrongdoing.
- Knowledge-sharing and team building. In addition to being trained, managers need to pass on/share their learning to develop and ensure a clear, unequivocal, and shared understanding about whistleblowing. This includes clearly communicating the following:
 - Wrongdoing should/must be reported.
 - Wrongdoing and reprisals will not be tolerated/will be punished.
 - Managers' receptivity to discussing issues related to wrongdoing/being a sounding board.
- Training for public servants that includes presentations by/involvement of upper management on the whistleblowing.
- More interaction between managers and non-managers related to the reporting of wrongdoing. This could include joint learning/training or periodic meetings/consultations to share and discuss information and issues related to the reporting of wrongdoing.
- Including the way managers deal with issues of wrongdoing as part of their performance evaluation.
- Stop/do not reward bad behaviour, e.g., promoting poor managers.
- Find some way to reward/acknowledge/recognize whistleblower, e.g., have a champion of whistleblowers.
- Do not insulate upper management from the repercussions resulting from bad treatment of/reprisals against those reporting wrongdoing.

Suggestions regarding the regime for reporting wrongdoing

Suggestions regarding what could be done within the regime for reporting wrongdoing most often focused on three things:

- Ensuring a system with ‘teeth in it’, in which there are real consequences for people who engage in wrongdoing and/or reprisals against those reporting it.
- Guaranteed anonymity/confidentiality for those reporting wrongdoing.
- An outside/independent organization for investigating issues of wrongdoing. This suggestion points to a lack of awareness of PSIC.

Additional suggestions included the following

- A transparent reporting system, i.e., one in which it is possible to follow what is happening and what consequences result from an investigation, including repercussions for reprisals.
- Ensuring the process for reporting is clear and easy to understand, not cumbersome, and timely. This was seen to include clarity about protections in place for those reporting wrongdoing.
- Clarity about the rights of people who report wrongdoing.
- Guaranteed protection for managers who support employees.

It is worth noting that it was suggested that changes in the regime for reporting wrongdoing are likely to be ineffective in reducing fear of reprisals unless accompanied by changes in the work culture/workplace environment. In other words, real change in this regard cannot be brought about exclusively through the reporting regime, no matter how effective it is.

Virtual consensus that fear of reprisals cannot be eliminated altogether

There was a virtual consensus among participants that the fear of reprisal cannot be eliminated altogether as a concern when reporting wrongdoing. Explanations focused on the following:

- Human nature, specifically the instinct to retaliate if one is accused of wrongdoing.
- The inability to be certain about anything, i.e., there will always be doubt in such matters and whistleblowers will inevitably be on their guard against this possibility, even if it is small.
- Reprisals can be subtle and include forms of micro-aggressions and can take a long time to manifest themselves.
- Anonymity cannot be 100% guaranteed. There is always a chance that word will get out and the possibility that the accused person has the right to know their accuser. It was suggested that until and unless confidentiality/anonymity can be guaranteed, fear of reprisals will remain.
- The impression, based on anecdotal evidence or experience, that cases of reporting wrongdoing typically do not end well for the whistleblower. In the words of one participant, ‘there never seems to be a happy ending to these stories’.
- A feeling that the process for investigating wrongdoing cannot be completely unbiased/objective, the point being that someone engaged in the investigation may ‘leak’ information about the identity of the person reporting wrongdoing.

6. Awareness and Knowledge of PSIC

This section reports on feedback related to awareness and knowledge of reporting mechanisms for the disclosure of wrongdoing.

Existence of PSIC is new information to most

Just over half the participants indicated that they were unaware of the Office of the Public Sector Integrity Commissioner of Canada prior to being contacted for this study. Managers were only slightly more likely to be aware of PSIC than non-managers. Among those aware of PSIC, a few could not recall how they became aware of the office. Those who could said they became aware of the office in a variety of ways:

- Information included in training sessions, including courses on resources, processes, procedures, and anti-harassment.
- Through a corporate email or link included in a departmental communiqué.
- As a result of working in Access to Information and Privacy (ATIP).
- As a result of working in human resources.
- As a result of work-related responsibilities related to Parliament and lobbying.
- As a result of staff changes, i.e., colleagues/staff transferred to PSIC.
- Personal experience/involvement in a PSIC investigation.
- Through colleagues, including colleagues involved in a PSIC investigation.
- As a result of personal interest on issues related to the reporting of wrongdoing.
- Through a public sector code of conduct document on integrity.
- Through a course on ethics in the public sector.
- Through the media.

Limited awareness of PSIC's role

Those aware of PSIC's existence had limited knowledge of its role when it comes to reporting wrongdoing and reprisals in the federal public service. In fact, most said they did not know what PSIC's role was in this regard. Those who could identify a role spoke generally about it being a third-party/independent/arm's length organization that investigates cases of wrongdoing.

Few have any impressions about PSIC

Given the limited awareness of PSIC's role, it is not surprising that most of those aware of its existence said they have no impression of it. Those participants who did have an impression of PSIC included ones who have had direct experience/interaction with it, know someone who has had such experience/interaction, or have looked for information about PSIC, including exploring its website. These impressions included the following, expressed by managers and non-managers:

- The review process is cumbersome/bureaucratic/takes time.
- There is not much face-to-face interaction. It's all pen to paper or faxing.
- They are very responsive when you contact them, but their website is not very user-friendly.
- They do not seem to be adequately staffed/resourced.
- Limited confidence in going to them, given the limited number of cases resulting in a finding of wrongdoing.

- They seem to cherry-pick their cases, i.e., advised by PSIC to proceed internally/through the department, despite a clearly expressed reluctance to do so.

Limited knowledge of existing reporting mechanisms for protected disclosure/reprisal protection

Asked how they would describe their own level of knowledge of existing reporting mechanisms for protected disclosure and reprisal protection, most participants described it as low or limited. This was the case for nearly all employees, but also a few managers. Reasons for characterizing the level of knowledge as low included the following:

- No experience of the process based on lack of need, i.e., this is not the kind of thing one tends to investigate until and unless one needs to.
- No training or orientation provided about this.
- Awareness/sense of first possible steps, such as going to one's manager or the union, but no knowledge of the process beyond such steps. As evidence of this, some re-iterated that they did not know about PSIC prior to this research.
- Inability to describe the reporting process/existing procedures.

Those who described their level of knowledge as 'moderate' or 'good' were all managers, and their characterization was based on experience or involvement with existing reporting procedures. Those with knowledge and experience of internal/departmental procedures were more likely to describe their level of knowledge as moderate, while those with knowledge and experience of internal and external procedures (meaning PSIC), described their level of knowledge as good.

7. Reaction to the Video

This section reports on participants' reactions to a short video produced by the Office of the Public Sector Integrity Commissioner of Canada related to disclosing wrongdoing in the federal public sector.

Mixed reactions to PSIC video

Participants' reactions to the video produced by PSIC were mixed, ranging from positive to indifferent to critical. That said feedback on the information provided was more likely to be neutral or negative than positive. Positive impressions were based on the following:

- The impression that this is important information, presented clearly and succinctly.
- That the information presented is new/something they did not know (see details below).
- That the video provides a good overview of the process from start to end.
- The emphasis on confidentiality being maintained.
- There are options/flexibility in terms of how to proceed.
- That one can go directly to PSIC.
- The video includes examples of wrongdoing.
- PSIC can be contacted to ask questions.

Negative impressions were based mainly on perceptions that the process sounds cumbersome and long, i.e., a decision to investigate within 90 days and complete investigations within a year. It was suggested that this will likely discourage people from reporting wrongdoing to PSIC, especially if

they are under stress. Many also expressed scepticism about anonymity and protection against reprisals.

Other aspects to which participants reacted negatively or critically included the following:

- Lack of recognition/acknowledgement that fear of reprisals is real and founded.
- The possibility of the case going before Parliament, which was described as ‘scary’.
- The idea of reporting internally, based on scepticism/apprehensions/lack of trust of internal processes.
- Absence of any real sense/impression that there will be serious consequences for wrongdoing. References to such consequences were described as vague, i.e., ‘recommendations to address the wrongdoing and make sure it does not happen again’.

Neutral/indifferent reactions to the video tended to be based mainly on style, including the following:

- The perception that it looks like a typical Government of Canada produced video in terms of tone and content.
- It makes the process of reporting wrongdoing sound too positive as an experience.
- The tone is too bureaucratic/impersonal/cold – the video provides lots of information but needs more warmth for someone going through process.
- The video looks dated in terms of presentation.
- The use of cartoon-like characters detracts from the seriousness of the theme.

Existence of PSIC is new information to many

Asked if they learned anything that they did not know before, participants most often indicated that they had not been aware of PSIC’s existence. Beyond this, participants identified the following as new information:

- The existence of different avenues/options for reporting wrongdoing.
- The ability to go directly to PSIC.
- The general procedure for reporting wrongdoing.
- The fact that no one else is contacted at the stage during which PSIC decides whether there are sufficient grounds to launch an investigation.
- Timelines for investigating and rendering a decision.
- The involvement of Parliament in the process.
- The existence of alternative if it is decided that there is no case of wrongdoing.

Most point to details on confidentiality and protection from reprisals as missing information

Asked if there is any important information missing from the video, the two most frequently identified things identified by participants were details about how confidentiality is ensured, and how whistleblowers are protected from reprisals. A number of other things were identified, but not with any frequency. They included the following:

- Is there a possibility that someone may have to testify?
- Is it possible that one might need/should engage a lawyer during the process?
- Can someone back-out/change their mind once the process begins?

- What are the whistleblowers rights throughout the process?
- Does PSIC have representation in the regions?
- Details/information on criteria for determining cases they will accept and ones they will not accept.
- Must the entirety of a complaint go ahead or can part of it go ahead?

8. Communications-Related Issues

This section reports on communications issues, including the best ways for PSIC to communicate with federal public servants both in terms of vehicles/channels of communication and in terms of substantive messaging.

Training and online—top suggestions for PSIC’s consideration when it comes to raising awareness

Participants identified various ways in which PSIC could effectively reach out to federal public servants, but two ways were identified most often by employees and managers: through training sessions (mandatory and/or periodic training), and by means of departmental intranets or infozones. Other ways of reaching out included the following:

- Have PSIC present at ‘all staff’ meetings.
- Choose a month of the year to showcase PSIC in the public service.
- Include a module on PSIC in courses at the Canada School of Public Service.
- Include posts on My Government of Canada Human Resources.
- Provide information about/from PSIC through the Employee Assistance Program (EAP).
- Include information about PSIC in information packages for people entering the public service.

A number of suggestions offered to better communicate about the regime for dealing with whistleblowing

When it came to how PSIC could better communicate about the regime in place for dealing with whistleblowing, participants focused on the following:

- Make information less procedural and more substantive. Do not focus only on procedures but try to provide more substantive details/information as well. It was observed that there is still too much of a ‘blackhole’ in this regard. Examples of such details are provided above under the heading ‘Missing information’.
- Humanize/personalize messaging. The focus of messaging should not be only on process/procedures because this comes across as ‘cold’ and ‘bureaucratic’. There should be a focus on telling a story, e.g., showing someone going through the process with a focus on addressing their potential concerns/fears/apprehensions. In this regard it was also noted that this kind of experience is very stressful for someone going through it, and as a result there should be some attempt at empathy in messaging.
- Try to instill confidence in the procedures/process, especially regarding protection of confidentiality and fear of reprisals. This could include providing FAQs as well as a flow chart that includes bulleted points with key information.
- Have messaging delivered directly by commissioner Joe Friday. This will make people feel that they are addressed directly and in a personal manner by the person at the head of PSIC.

Track record—main message to focus on to convey to public servants that reprisals are taken seriously

When it came to how to convey to public servants that reprisals are taken seriously, participants most often suggested that PSIC focus its messaging on the Agency's track record by emphasizing positive outcomes, success stories, and consequences faced by wrongdoers. Beyond this, it was suggested that PSIC update its case reports, acknowledge that fear of reprisals is real, provide details about the procedure when reprisals occur, e.g., who to contact/resources, mechanisms in place to deal with reprisals, and provide testimonials from people who have dealt with PSIC.

Most lack information/resources to deal with issues of whistleblowing and protection from reprisals

Most participants, including most managers, feel that they do not have the information and resources they need to deal with issues of whistleblowing and protection from reprisals. Reasons why they think this is so included the following:

- Lack of information about how confidentiality is maintained and how whistleblowers are protected from reprisals.
- Lack of confidence in ability to explain the process/procedures for reporting wrongdoing to others.
- Lack of knowledge of where to go/who to contact for (additional) information/resources about reporting wrongdoing.
- Lack of knowledge of process/procedures beyond internal channels.
- Inability to identify or guide others about what constitutes wrongdoing.
- Lack of clarity about how to start/initiate the process of reporting wrongdoing.
- Lack of knowledge/awareness of who to contact/consult for advice/counselling regarding reporting of wrongdoing.

9. Comparison of findings over time

As noted, similar qualitative research was conducted in 2011 and 2015. What follows in this section is a comparison of this year's findings to those of 2015. There are no comparisons to the 2011 findings.

For the most part, participant feedback on issues explored in relation to the reporting of wrongdoing is similar to feedback received in 2015. This includes considerations that come to mind when thinking about whistleblowing, attitudes towards whistleblowing in the public service, factors that would encourage public servants to report wrongdoing as well as concerns about so doing, attitudes concerning fear of reprisals and how to reduce or address these fears, and levels of awareness of PSIC.

The main difference between the current iteration and that of 2015 concerns the extent of cynicism, scepticism, and disillusionment regarding the process of reporting wrongdoing,

particularly as it relates to maintaining confidentiality and protection against reprisals. More specifically,

- In terms of attitudes towards whistleblowing, the sense of cynicism, scepticism, and disillusionment regarding the process for reporting wrongdoing is more palpable and widespread now than in 2015.
- Participants were much more likely than they were in 2015 to say that their attitude towards whistleblowing has changed over the course of their career in the public service. In their estimation, they have become less naïve, more pessimistic, or more cynical about the process for reporting wrongdoing.
- Overall reaction to the video on disclosing wrongdoing in the federal public sector produced by PSIC was mixed this year. In contrast, in 2015, most participants tended to react positively to the video. Moreover, in 2015 participants were most likely to react positively to the emphasis on protection of whistleblowers and maintaining confidentiality, whereas in 2022 many expressed scepticism about both these points.
- Concerning information missing from the video or additional information they would like, participants most often identified details about how confidentiality is ensured, and how whistleblowers are protected from reprisals. In 2015, neither of these was identified with any frequency.

Appendix

Validation Letter



February 2022

Re: Research with Federal Government Employees

Dear Colleague,

The Office of the Public Sector Integrity Commissioner of Canada (PSIC) is an independent federal organization mandated to receive, review and investigate allegations of wrongdoing within the federal public sector. It also helps to protect from reprisal public sector employees who have made a disclosure of wrongdoing or participated in an investigation. PSIC is undertaking research with federal public servants to explore issues related to the reporting of wrongdoing in the public sector, including the factors that contribute to the fear of reprisal.

An independent research firm, Phoenix Strategic Perspectives, has been commissioned to conduct this study on our behalf. The research consists of a set of online focus groups. Individuals* contacted for this research have been randomly chosen from a list of employees who work in the federal public sector via the government employee directory. If you are contacted for this research, please consider taking part.

Your participation is completely voluntary, but would be greatly appreciated. Your feedback will help us to better understand how to create workplace environments that value disclosures of wrongdoing. Please be assured that the information you volunteer will be held in the strictest confidence and used for research purposes only. All information provided will be summarized in a report, and no individuals or organizations will be identified in any way.

If you have any questions, or want more information about this research, please contact Bronwyn Johns-O'Hara at PSIC at 1-613-415-5185 or Johns.Ohara.Bronwyn@psic-ispc.gc.ca.

On behalf of PSIC, I would like to thank you for considering taking part in this important research.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Friday".

Joe Friday
Public Sector Integrity Commissioner

*Individuals who take part will receive a cash honorarium to thank them for their time. In our view, it is generally acceptable to receive a nominal honorarium for activities such as a focus group that you attend on your own time, and that your attendance should present no apparent, potential or real conflict of interest with your employment as a public servant.

Email Invitation

Sender: Phoenix SPI

Re: Research with federal public servants / Étude auprès des fonctionnaires fédéraux

(Le texte français suit l'anglais.)

Hello,

Research participants needed!

The Office of the Public Sector Integrity Commissioner of Canada (PSIC) is undertaking research with federal public servants to explore issues related to the reporting of wrongdoing in the public sector. PSIC has retained Phoenix Strategic Perspectives Inc. (Phoenix SPI), an independent research firm, to conduct online focus groups to explore whistleblowing and fear of reprisal in the federal public sector. The findings from this research will be used by PSIC to better communicate with public servants about the federal whistleblowing regime.

More information about PSIC and the research can be found in the attached letter from the Public Sector Integrity Commissioner.

Research participants will be asked to take part in a 2-hour online focus group in their official language of choice. The focus group will take place outside of the workday and participants will receive a cash honorarium to thank them for their time.

If you wish to volunteer for this research, please follow this [LINK] to complete the online questionnaire to see if you qualify for the study. The link will be open until February 28, 2022. If you are unable to click on the link, please copy and paste the URL [INSERT] into your web browser.

Alternatively, the questionnaire can also be completed over the telephone upon request. To complete the questionnaire by telephone, you may contact Phoenix SPI at research@phoenixspi.ca or 1-844-960-1700, ext. 222.

Your decision to participate in this research is completely voluntary and your feedback will be protected under the [Privacy Act](#), the [Access to Information Act](#), and all other pertinent legislation. You should not fear reprisals as a result of your participation in the study. Representatives from PSIC may observe the online focus group. Observers will only hear first names of participants.

If you would like more information about this study, please contact Bronwyn Johns-O'Hara at PSIC at 1-613-415-5185 or Johns-Ohara.Bronwyn@psic-ispc.gc.ca.

Thank you in advance for your participation.

Sincerely,

Alethea Woods, President
Phoenix Strategic Perspectives Inc.

Recruitment Screener

Landing Page

Thank you for your interest in this research study. This online questionnaire will take up to five (5) minutes to complete. The purpose of the online questionnaire is to confirm the eligibility of individuals interested in participating in this research study.

Background information

- This research study is being conducted by Phoenix Strategic Perspectives (Phoenix SPI), a Canadian public opinion research firm, on behalf of the Office of the Public Sector Integrity Commissioner of Canada (PSIC), an independent federal organization.
- The purpose of the study is to explore issues related to the reporting of wrongdoing in the federal public sector.
- We are interested in hearing your opinions and experiences only; no attempt will be made to change your point of view or sell you anything.

About the research study

- The research involves a set of online focus groups that will be conducted March 3 to 11, 2022.
- Participants are being selected based on the results of this online questionnaire.
- Each online focus group will last approximately two (2) hours and will take place **outside** of the workday.
- People who take part will receive a cash honorarium to thank them for their time.
- Your decision to complete the questionnaire is completely voluntary and your responses will be confidential.
- You should not fear any reprisals as a result of your participation in the study.
- Representatives from PSIC may observe the online focus group. Observers will only hear first names of participants.

What about your personal information?

- Your personal information will be collected by Phoenix SPI in accordance with the applicable provincial privacy legislation or the [Personal Information Protection and Electronic Documents Act](#) (PIPEDA).
- Phoenix SPI supports and strictly adheres to the [Standards for the Conduct of Government of Canada Public Opinion Research](#), industry standards and guidelines for Internet and other types of research.
- To view Phoenix SPI's privacy policy, please [click here](#).

Need to contact us?

PROGRAMMING NOTE: "Contact us" will open a new window that will contain the following:

Start

Eligibility Screener

1. Do you currently hold a position classified at the EX or EX minus 1 level?

- | | |
|-----------------------|------------------------|
| 01. Yes | [EXECUTIVE/MANAGEMENT] |
| 02. No | CONTINUE |
| 99. Prefer not to say | CONTINUE |

2. [IF Q1=02] Are you a manager with financial delegation?

- | | |
|-----------------------|------------------------|
| 01. Yes | [EXECUTIVE/MANAGEMENT] |
| 02. No | [NON-MANAGEMENT] |
| 99. Prefer not to say | THANK/TERMINATE-NR |

TERMINATION MESSAGE-NR: Thank you for your interest in this research. For the purpose of this study, we need to know this information in order to ensure we collect feedback from all types of federal public servants.

3. Which department or agency do you currently work for? [RECRUIT A MIX]

[LIST OF ALL ELIGIBLE DEPARTMENTS/AGENCIES IN ALPHABETICAL ORDER]

- | | |
|-----------------------|--------------------|
| 98. None of these | THANK/TERMINATE-SD |
| 99. Prefer not to say | THANK/TERMINATE-NR |

TERMINATION MESSAGE-SD: Thank you for your co-operation. We already have enough participants who have a similar profile to yours, so we are unable to invite you to participate.

4. What is your current position or job title within your department or agency? Please select the response that best matches your position or job title. [RECRUIT A MIX]

[LIST REPRESENTATIVE TITLES IN ALPHABETICAL ORDER]

- 01. Administrator
- 02. Advisor
- 03. Analyst
- 04. Assistant
- 05. Coordinator
- 06. Director
- 07. Director General
- 08. Engineer
- 09. General/Legal Counsel
- 10. Manager
- 11. Officer
- 12. Researcher
- 13. Scientist
- 14. Specialist
- 15. Statistician

98. Other. Please specify: [TEXT]
99. Prefer not to say THANK/TERMINATE-NR

5. In which area do you work? Please select the response that best matches the area in which you currently work. [RECRUIT A MIX]

- 01. Administration
 - 02. Audit
 - 03. Clerical
 - 04. Communications / Translation
 - 05. Computer Systems / Technical Services
 - 06. Economics / Social Sciences
 - 07. Education / Library Science
 - 08. Engineering
 - 09. Finance
 - 10. Health
 - 11. Human Resources
 - 12. Information Management/Technology
 - 13. Legal Services
 - 14. Operations
 - 15. Policy
 - 16. Procurement
 - 17. Program
 - 18. Regulatory
 - 19. Research
 - 20. Sciences / Applied Sciences
98. None of these THANK/TERMINATE-SD
99. Prefer not to say THANK/TERMINATE-NR

6. How many years have you worked in the federal public service? Please include the time in your current position as well as any previous positions. [RECRUIT A MIX]

- 01. Less than 5 years [10 YEAR OR LESS]
- 02. 5 to 10 years [10 YEAR OR LESS]
- 03. 11 to 20 years [11+ YEARS]
- 04. Over 20 years [11+ YEARS]
- 99. Prefer not to say THANK/TERMINATE-NR

7. In which of the following age categories do you belong? [RECRUIT A MIX BY AGE WITHIN EACH AGE SEGMENT: UNDER 35 AND AGED 35+]

- 01. 24 years and under [UNDER 35]
- 02. 25 to 29 years [UNDER 35]
- 03. 30 to 34 years [UNDER 35]
- 04. 35 to 39 years [35 AND OLDER]
- 05. 40 to 44 years [35 AND OLDER]
- 06. 45 to 49 years [35 AND OLDER]
- 07. 50 to 54 years [35 AND OLDER]

08. 55 to 59 years	[35 AND OLDER]
09. 60 years and over	[35 AND OLDER]
99. Prefer not to say	THANK/TERMINATE-NR

8. Which best describes your gender? [RECRUIT A MIX]

01. Female
02. Male
03. Non-binary
99. Prefer not to say

9. In which province or territory do you work? [WATCH QUOTAS]

[LIST IN ALPHABETICAL ORDER]

01. National Capital Region	
02. Ontario (outside the NCR)	
03. Quebec (outside the NCR)	
04. Newfoundland and Labrador	
05. Nova Scotia	
06. Prince Edward Island	
07. New Brunswick	
08. Manitoba	
09. Saskatchewan	
10. Alberta	
11. British Columbia	
12. Nunavut	
13. Northwest Territories	
14. Yukon Territory	
15. Outside of Canada	THANK/TERMINATE-SD
99. Prefer not to say	THANK/TERMINATE-NR

10. In which official language would you like to participate in this study?

01. English	
02. French	
99. Prefer not to say	THANK/TERMINATE-NR

Consent

11. People invited to participate in the online focus group will need access to a computer, either a desktop or laptop, with high-speed Internet. Do you have access to these items?

01. Yes	CONTINUE
02. No	THANK/TERMINATE-SD

12. How comfortable are you participating in an online discussion through typing and use of a webcam?

- | | |
|----------------------------|--------------------|
| 01. Very comfortable | CONTINUE |
| 02. Somewhat comfortable | CONTINUE |
| 03. Not very comfortable | THANK/TERMINATE-SD |
| 04. Not at all comfortable | THANK/TERMINATE-SD |

13. The online focus group will be recorded. These recordings are used to help with analyzing the findings and writing the report. The results from the focus groups will be grouped together in the research report, which means that individuals will not be identified in any way. Do you consent to being recorded?

- | | |
|---------|--------------------|
| 01. Yes | CONTINUE |
| 02. No | THANK/TERMINATE-SD |

14. Representatives from PSIC may observe the online focus group. Observers will only hear first names of participants. Do you consent to representatives observing the discussion?

- | | |
|---------|--------------------|
| 01. Yes | CONTINUE |
| 02. No | THANK/TERMINATE-SD |

Invitation to Participate

We would like to invite you to participate in an online focus group.

15. Are you willing to participate in an online focus group taking place in the evening between March 3 to 11, 2022?

- | | |
|---------|--------------------|
| 01. Yes | CONTINUE |
| 02. No | THANK/TERMINATE-FN |

TERMINATION MESSAGE-FN: Thank you for your interest and taking the time to complete the online questionnaire.

16. May we have your contact information so that we can call you to confirm your participation and send you information regarding how to participate?

First name:

First initial of the last name:

Telephone:

Extension number (if applicable):

Email:

17. Do you consent to a researcher from CRC Research contacting you on behalf of Phoenix SPI to confirm your participation? To do this, Phoenix SPI will provide CRC Research with your name and telephone number.

- | | |
|---------|--------------------|
| 01. Yes | CONTINUE |
| 02. No | THANK/TERMINATE-NR |

EXIT MESSAGE: Thank you very much for your time and willingness to participate in this research. A member of the research team will contact you in the coming week to confirm your participation.

Recruitment Confirmation Call

Hello, my name is _____. I'm calling from CRC Research on behalf of Phoenix SPI. You recently completed an online questionnaire about participating in focus groups being conducted with federal public servants for the Office of the Public Sector Integrity Commissioner of Canada. The purpose of this call is to confirm your participation.

As a reminder, the online focus group will last approximately two hours. People who take part will receive a cash honorarium* to thank them for their time. Participation in the research is completely voluntary. All information collected in the focus group will be used for research purposes only, in accordance with laws designed to protect your privacy. All responses will be kept entirely confidential. No individuals or organizations will be identified in any way.

*IF RESPONDENTS ARE CONCERNED ABOUT THE CASH INCENTIVE, PLEASE LET THEM KNOW THAT THE FOCUS GROUP TAKE PLACES OUTSIDE OF WORK SO THE INCENTIVE IS ACCEPTABLE.

May I continue?

- | | |
|---------|-----------------|
| 01. Yes | CONTINUE |
| 02. No | THANK/TERMINATE |

IF RESPONDENTS HESITATE, EXPRESS CONCERN, QUESTION THE VALIDITY OF THE RESEARCH, OR ASK FOR MORE INFORMATION, OFFER TO SEND THEM THE VALIDATION LETTER FROM PSIC OR INVITE THEM TO CALL BRONWYN JOHNS-O'HARA OF PSIC AT 1-613-415-5185 OR Johns-O'hara.Bronwyn@psic-ispc.gc.ca. YOU MAY ALSO PROVIDE THE CRIC RESEARCH VERIFICATION SERVICE WEBSITE (<https://www.canadianresearchinsightscouncil.ca/rvs/home/>) AND PROJECT CODE: 20220203-PH234.

IF RESPONDENTS ASK HOW THEIR CONTACT INFORMATION WAS OBTAINED, EXPLAIN THAT THE GOVERNMENT ELECTRONIC DIRECTORY SERVICES (GEDS; CURRENTLY CALLED GCdirectory) WAS USED.

1. To confirm, do you currently hold a position classified at the EX (PRONOUNCED "E-X") or EX minus 1 level?

- | | |
|---------------------------|------------------------|
| 01. Yes, EX level | [EXECUTIVE/MANAGEMENT] |
| 02. Yes, EX minus 1 level | [EXECUTIVE/MANAGEMENT] |
| 03. No | [NON-MANAGEMENT] |

ALL INDIVIDUALS SHOULD KNOW THEIR CLASSIFICATION. HOWEVER, 'EX MINUS 1' IS NOT AN OFFICIAL CLASSIFICATION, BUT RATHER DENOTES THE LEVELS IN DIFFERENT JOB CLASSIFICATIONS THAT ARE JUST BELOW THE EX (SENIOR MANAGEMENT) LEVEL. IF SOMEONE IS UNSURE WHETHER HE/SHE IS AN EX MINUS 1 LEVEL, ASK IF THEY ARE A MANAGER WITH FINANCIAL DELEGATION. IF YES, CLASSIFY THEM AS EX MINUS 1.

2. Could you please confirm which department or agency you currently work for?

Department/agency: _____

3. And, in which province or territory do you work? IF ASKED: This information is needed to make sure you are assigned to a focus group that takes place in your time zone.

Location: _____

The online focus group will take place on [DAY OF WEEK], [DATE], at [TIME]. It will last approximately two hours. People who attend will receive a cash payment of [\$100 FOR NON-MANAGEMENT; \$150 FOR EXECUTIVE/MANAGER] in thanks for their time. Would you be willing to attend?

01. Yes
02. No

CONTINUE
THANK/TERMINATE

Information regarding how to participate will be sent to you by email in the coming days. The email will come from Phoenix SPI and the address will be research@phoenixspi.ca. You will be asked to log into the online session 15 minutes prior to the start time.

As we are only inviting a small number of people to attend, your participation is very important to us. If for some reason you are unable to attend, please call so that we can get someone to replace you. Please reach us at [INSERT TELEPHONE NUMBER] and ask for [INSERT NAME]. A member of our team will call you the day before to remind you about the focus group.

Could I please confirm the email address you would like Phoenix SPI to use to send you the information needed to participate in the online focus group?

[EMAIL]:

Moderator's Guide (Non-management)

Introduction (5 minutes)

→ Introduce moderator/firm and welcome participants to the focus group.

TECHNICAL CHECK; CONFIRM SOUND AND VIDEO QUALITY.

- Thank you for attending/value your being here.
- Tonight, we are conducting research on behalf of the Office of the Public Sector Integrity Commissioner of Canada (PSIC) to explore issues related to the reporting of wrongdoing in the federal public sector.
- The discussion will last approximately 2 hours.

→ Describe focus group.

- This is a “virtual round table” discussion.
- My job is to facilitate the discussion, keeping us on topic and on time.
- Your job is to offer your opinions about the issues to be covered tonight.
- There are no right or wrong answers. We are looking for candour and honesty.
- I’d like to hear from everyone, so we have a range of opinions. Looking for minority, as well as majority opinion, so don’t hold back if you have a comment that may be different from others.
- We understand that tonight’s topic is a sensitive one, and therefore we will not ask about anyone’s personal experience in this area.
- I’ll try to call on you, but feel free to wave if you want to contribute.

→ Explanations.

- Comments treated in confidence.
 - Anything you say during these groups will be held in confidence.
 - Our report summarizes the findings but does not mention anyone by name.
- The session is being video recorded. The recordings remain in our possession and will not be released to anyone, even to the Government of Canada, without your written consent.
 - Recording is for report writing purposes/verify feedback.
- There are people from PSIC involved in this project who will be observing tonight’s online session.
 - Purpose: oversee the research process and see your reactions first-hand.

→ Any questions?

→ Roundtable introduction: Let’s start with everyone introducing themselves? Could you please tell me your first name and the type of work you do.

*Questions marked with an asterisk are to be asked only if time permits.

Context/Background (5 minutes)

Since all of you are federal public servants. I'd like to begin by asking you a few questions about your careers in the federal public sector.

1. How many years have you worked in the federal public service?
2. How many of you have worked for more than one department or agency at the federal level?

Attitudes Towards 'Whistleblowing' (35 minutes)

As I mentioned in my introductory remarks, tonight we will explore factors related to the reporting of wrongdoing in the federal public sector. For the sake of consistency, I'll use the expression 'whistleblowing' for the rest of the evening to refer to reporting wrongdoing within the federal public sector.

I'd like to begin with some general questions.

3. As public servants, what considerations come to mind when you think about 'whistleblowing' in the public service? NOTE TO MODERATOR: THE FOCUS IS NOT ON THE EXPRESSION'S MEANING OR CONNOTATIONS BUT ON WHAT THEY TEND TO THINK ABOUT WHEN THEY THINK ABOUT 'WHISTLEBLOWING'. BE ATTENTIVE TO MENTION OF REPRISALS AS AN ISSUE/CONSIDERATION
4. Why do you tend to think about or focus on these kinds of things?
5. How would you describe your own attitude towards 'whistleblowing' in the public service? Has your attitude changed over time? If so, how and why?

Probe: - Positive/neutral/critical
- Perception of/attitude towards 'whistleblowers'

6. Thinking of your own time in the federal public service, would you say things have changed regarding 'whistleblowing'? If so, how? If not, why not? BE ATTENTIVE TO MENTION OF PANDEMIC IN CONTEXT OF WHISTLEBLOWING

Probe: - Perception of/attitude towards 'whistleblowers'
- Measures in place/procedures to facilitate 'whistleblowing'

IF COVID-19/PANDEMIC NOT MENTIONED, ASK:

7. As a result of the pandemic, do you think anything has changed regarding 'whistleblowing'? This includes anything related to the committing/reporting of wrongdoing, including possible reprisals for reporting. If so, how?

Probe: - ease or difficulty of committing wrongdoing
- ability to prove/document wrongdoing
- type/nature of wrongdoing
- severity of wrongdoing

- assessing what constitutes/does not constitute wrongdoing
- nature/liability of reprisals
- ability to prove/document reprisals

There are a variety of factors that someone might consider when deciding whether to report a wrongdoing that may have been committed within the federal public sector.

8. What would encourage or motivate you to report a wrongdoing? Anything else?

- Probe:
- Certainty/proof of wrongdoing
 - Perceived severity of wrongdoing
 - Guaranteed anonymity/confidentiality
 - Support/encouragement/structures in place for reporting
 - Knowledge of process/who to contact
 - Confidence in process (e.g., independent/impartial investigation)
 - Confidence in outcome (e.g., consequences/appropriate action)

9. What concerns or apprehensions would you have about reporting a wrongdoing?

- Probe:
- Fear of reprisal
 - Stigma/work culture that frowns on disclosure
 - Lack of knowledge/uncertainty about process/how to proceed
 - Lack of confidence in process/procedure/investigation
 - Complexity of process/time commitment

10. If you were contemplating reporting wrongdoing, what would you consider when deciding what to do and why?

- Probe:
- What would factor into the decision making-process?
 - What rationale would underscore actions?

Focus on Fear of Reprisals (30 mins)

I'd now like to focus on the issue of possible reprisals for reporting wrongdoing. ADJUST INTRODUCTORY LANGUAGE SLIGHTLY IF ISSUE OF POSSIBLE REPRISALS HAS ALREADY EMERGED UNPROMPTED (E.G., 'SOME OF YOU HAVE ALREADY RAISED THE ISSUE OF REPRISALS ...')

11. In your opinion, how real a concern is fear of reprisal for reporting a wrongdoing? What types of reprisals do you think those reporting a wrongdoing could potentially face?

The 2020 iteration of the federal Public Service Employment Survey asked respondents to express their level of agreement with the following statement: *I feel I can initiate a formal recourse process (e.g., grievance, complaint, appeal) without fear of reprisal.* Nearly one-quarter of respondents provided negative responses (i.e., disagreeing with this statement).

12. Why do you think this is? What do you think they meant?

13. What could be done to address this... to lessen concerns about reprisals and make public servants feel that they will be protected from reprisals if they report a wrongdoing?
14. What do you think needs to be in place within the work culture or workplace environment to address/reduce fear of reprisals?
15. What do you think needs to be in place within the regime for reporting wrongdoing to address/reduce fear of reprisals?
16. Do you think fear of reprisal can be eliminated altogether as a concern when reporting wrongdoing? If so, how? If not, why not?

Awareness and Knowledge of Reporting Mechanisms (30 minutes)

17. Prior to our contacting you for this study, had you heard of the Office of the Public Sector Integrity Commissioner of Canada? GET HAND COUNT

IF AWARE OF PSIC:

18. How did you become aware of PSIC?
19. What do you know about it and its role when it comes to reporting wrongdoings and reprisals in the federal public service? Anything else?
20. What impressions, if any, do you have of PSIC? Why is that?

Probe: - positive/neutral/critical impression

21. How would you describe your own knowledge of existing reporting mechanisms for protected disclosure and reprisal protection? Please explain?

I'm now going to show you a short video produced by the Office of the Public Sector Integrity Commissioner of Canada related to disclosing wrongdoing in the federal public sector. Let's watch it together, then we'll talk about it.

22. What is your overall impression of what you just saw? Why? Anything else?

Probe: - positive/neutral/critical reaction

23. Did you learn anything that you did not know before? Anything else?
24. What, if anything, did you react positively to? Why? Anything else?
25. And what, if anything, did you react negatively to or created concern? Why? Anything else?
26. Is there any important information missing, something else that you want to know regarding how to disclose wrongdoing and protection from reprisal? If so, what?

Communications-Related Issues (15 minutes)

27. What do you think are the best way(s) for the Office of the Public Sector Integrity Commissioner of Canada to raise awareness? In other words, how can the Office best reach out to you and other federal public servants who are bombarded daily with messaging?
28. How can the Office better communicate about the regime in place for dealing with 'whistleblowing'? THE FOCUS HERE IS ON MESSAGING, NOT THE MEANS OF COMMUNICATING
29. How can the Office better convey to public servants that reprisals are taken seriously? THE FOCUS HERE IS ON MESSAGING, NOT THE MEANS OF COMMUNICATING
30. As employees of the federal public service, do you think you have the information and resources needed when it comes to dealing with issues of whistleblowing and protection from reprisals? If not, why not?

Probe: - what is missing/what could be improved

Conclusion (10 mins)

31. Do you have any final comments about anything we have discussed tonight?

This concludes the discussion group. On behalf of the Office of the Public Sector Integrity Commissioner of Canada, I would like to thank you for your time and participation today. Your incentive will be available via e-transfer or a cheque. We will contact you by email to determine your preference.

You can all log out now. Have a great evening!

Moderator's Guide (Management)

Introduction (5 minutes)

→ Introduce moderator/firm and welcome participants to the focus group.

TECHNICAL CHECK; CONFIRM SOUND AND VIDEO QUALITY.

- Thank you for attending/value your being here.
- Tonight, we are conducting research on behalf of the Office of the Public Sector Integrity Commissioner of Canada (PSIC) to explore issues related to the reporting of wrongdoing in the federal public sector.
- The discussion will last approximately 2 hours.

→ Describe focus group.

- This is a “virtual round table” discussion.
- My job is to facilitate the discussion, keeping us on topic and on time.
- Your job is to offer your opinions about the issues to be covered tonight.
- There are no right or wrong answers. We are looking for candour and honesty.
- I’d like to hear from everyone, so we have a range of opinions. Looking for minority, as well as majority opinion, so don’t hold back if you have a comment that may be different from others.
- We understand that tonight’s topic is a sensitive one, and therefore we will not ask about anyone’s personal experience in this area.
- I’ll try to call on you, but feel free to wave if you want to contribute.

→ Explanations.

- Comments treated in confidence.
 - Anything you say during these groups will be held in confidence.
 - Our report summarizes the findings but does not mention anyone by name.
- The session is being video recorded. The recordings remain in our possession and will not be released to anyone, even to the Government of Canada, without your written consent.
 - Recording is for report writing purposes/verify feedback.
- There are people from PSIC involved in this project who will be observing tonight’s online session.
 - Purpose: oversee the research process and see your reactions first-hand.

→ Any questions?

→ Roundtable introduction: Let’s start with everyone introducing themselves? Could you please tell me your first name and the area in which you work?

*Questions marked with an asterisk are to be asked only if time permits.

Context/Background (5 minutes)

All of you are managers in the federal public service. I'd like to begin by asking you a few questions about your careers in the federal public sector.

1. How many years have you worked in the federal public service? How many of you have worked for more than one department or agency at the federal level?
2. How long have you been in management positions in the federal public service?
3. As I mentioned in my introductory remarks, tonight we will explore factors related to the reporting of wrongdoing in the federal public sector. Is this something you ever think about or discuss with other managers or employees in the public service? Why do you say that?

Probe: - think about, but don't discuss (i.e., taboo subject)
- discuss, but not with colleagues/at work
- discuss with managers but not employees
- discuss with managers and employees, but differently

Attitudes Towards 'Whistleblowing' (35 minutes)

For the sake of consistency, I'll use the expression 'whistleblowing' for the rest of the evening to refer to reporting wrongdoing within the federal public sector.

I'd like to begin with some general questions.

4. As public servants, what considerations come to mind when you think about 'whistleblowing' in the public service? NOTE TO MODERATOR: THE FOCUS IS NOT ON THE EXPRESSION'S MEANING OR CONNOTATIONS BUT ON WHAT THEY TEND TO THINK ABOUT WHEN THEY THINK ABOUT 'WHISTLEBLOWING'. BE ATTENTIVE TO MENTION OF REPRISALS AS AN ISSUE/CONSIDERATION AS WELL AS ANY CONSIDERATIONS SPECIFIC TO THEMSELVES AS MANAGERS
5. Why do you tend to think about or focus on these kinds of things?
6. How would you describe your own attitude towards 'whistleblowing' in the public service? Has your attitude changed over time? If so, how and why?

Probe: - Positive/neutral/critical
- Perception of/attitude towards 'whistleblowers'

7. Thinking of your own time in the federal public service, would you say things have changed regarding 'whistleblowing'? If so, how? If not, why not? BE ATTENTIVE TO MENTION OF PANDEMIC IN CONTEXT OF WHISTLEBLOWING

Probe: - Perception of/attitude towards 'whistleblowers'
- Measures in place/procedures to facilitate 'whistleblowing'

IF COVID-19/PANDEMIC NOT MENTIONED, ASK:

8. As a result of the pandemic, do you think anything has changed regarding ‘whistleblowing’? This includes anything related to the committing/reporting of wrongdoing, including possible reprisals for reporting. If so, how?

- Probe:
- ease or difficulty of committing wrongdoing
 - ability to prove/document wrongdoing
 - type/nature of wrongdoing
 - severity of wrongdoing
 - assessing what constitutes/does not constitute wrongdoing
 - nature/liability of reprisals
 - ability to prove/document reprisals

9. As managers, do you think you have any specific role or responsibilities in this area? If so, what are they?

There are a variety of factors that someone might consider when deciding whether to report a wrongdoing that may have been committed within the federal public sector.

10. What would encourage or motivate you to report a wrongdoing? Anything else?

- Probe:
- Certainty/proof of wrongdoing
 - Perceived severity of wrongdoing
 - Guaranteed anonymity/confidentiality
 - Support/encouragement/structures in place for reporting
 - Knowledge of process/who to contact
 - Confidence in process (e.g., independent/impartial investigation)
 - Confidence in outcome (e.g., consequences/appropriate action)

11. What concerns or apprehensions would you have about reporting a wrongdoing?

- Probe:
- Fear of reprisal
 - Stigma/work culture that frowns on disclosure
 - Lack of knowledge/uncertainty about process/how to proceed
 - Lack of confidence in process/procedure/investigation
 - Complexity of process/time commitment

12. What concerns or apprehensions do you think an employee might have about reporting a wrongdoing to you or bringing it to your attention?

13. If you were contemplating reporting wrongdoing, what would you consider when deciding what to do and why?

- Probe:
- What would factor into the decision making-process?
 - What rationale would underscore actions?

14. What if an employee approached you about reporting wrongdoing? Would you advise them to proceed in the same way? If not, why not? What role, if any, would you play in such a situation?

Focus on Fear of Reprisals (30 mins)

I'd now like to focus on the issue of possible reprisals for reporting wrongdoing. ADJUST INTRODUCTORY LANGUAGE SLIGHTLY IF ISSUE OF POSSIBLE REPRISALS HAS ALREADY EMERGED UNPROMPTED (E.G., 'SOME OF YOU HAVE ALREADY RAISED THE ISSUE OF REPRISALS ...')

15. In your opinion, how real a concern is fear of reprisal for reporting a wrongdoing? What types of reprisals do you think those reporting a wrongdoing could potentially face?

The 2020 iteration of the federal Public Service Employment Survey asked respondents to express their level of agreement with the following statement: *I feel I can initiate a formal recourse process (e.g., grievance, complaint, appeal) without fear of reprisal.* Nearly one-quarter of respondents provided negative responses (i.e., disagreeing with this statement).

16. Why do you think this is? What do you think they meant?

17. In your opinion, are concerns about reprisals for reporting wrongdoing as real or justified for public servants like yourselves, in management positions, as they are for public servants in non-management positions? Why do you think that?

Probe: -less justified/equally justified/more justified

18. What could be done to address this... to lessen concerns about reprisals and make public servants feel that they will be protected from reprisals if they report a wrongdoing?

19. What do you think needs to be in place within the work culture or workplace environment to address/reduce fear of reprisals?

20. What do you think needs to be in place within the regime for reporting wrongdoing to address/reduce fear of reprisals?

21. Do you think fear of reprisal can be eliminated altogether as a concern when reporting wrongdoing? If so, how? If not, why not?

Awareness and Knowledge of Reporting Mechanisms (30 minutes)

22. Prior to our contacting you for this study, had you heard of the Office of the Public Sector Integrity Commissioner of Canada? GET HAND COUNT

IF AWARE OF PSIC:

23. How did you become aware of PSIC?

24. What do you know about it and its role when it comes to reporting wrongdoings and reprisals in the federal public service? Anything else?

25. What impressions, if any, do you have of PSIC? Why is that?

Probe: - positive/neutral/critical impression

26. How would you describe your own knowledge of existing reporting mechanisms for protected disclosure and reprisal protection? Please explain?

I'm now going to show you a short video produced by the Office of the Public Sector Integrity Commissioner of Canada related to disclosing wrongdoing in the federal public sector. Let's watch it together, then we'll talk about it.

27. What is your overall impression of what you just saw? Why? Anything else?

Probe: - positive/neutral/critical reaction

28. Did you learn anything that you did not know before? Anything else?

29. What, if anything, did you react positively to? Why? Anything else?

30. And what, if anything, did you react negatively to or created concern? Why? Anything else?

31. Is there any important information missing, something else that you want to know regarding how to disclose wrongdoing and protection from reprisal? If so, what?

Communications-Related Issues (15 minutes)

32. What do you think are the best way(s) for the Office of the Public Sector Integrity Commissioner of Canada to raise awareness? In other words, how can the Office best reach out to you and other federal public servants who are bombarded daily with messaging?

33. How can the Office better communicate about the regime in place for dealing with 'whistleblowing'? THE FOCUS HERE IS ON MESSAGING, NOT THE MEANS OF COMMUNICATING

34. How can the Office better convey to public servants that reprisals are taken seriously? THE FOCUS HERE IS ON MESSAGING, NOT THE MEANS OF COMMUNICATING

35. As managers, do you think you have the information and resources needed when it comes to dealing with issues of whistleblowing and protection from reprisals? If not, why not?

Probe: - what is missing/what could be improved

Conclusion (10 mins)

36. Do you have any final comments about anything we have discussed tonight?

This concludes the discussion group. On behalf of the Office of the Public Sector Integrity Commissioner of Canada, I would like to thank you for your time and participation today. Your incentive will be available via e-transfer or a cheque. We will contact you by email to determine your preference.

You can all log out now. Have a great evening!