

How Does Collaborative Cheating Emerge? A Case Study of the Volkswagen Emissions Scandal



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Abstract

Since 2014, Volkswagen (VW) has been enthralled in a reputation-tarnishing cheating scandal that has raised questions regarding how collaborative cheating unfolds in organizational settings. While the behavioral ethics literature provides some insights, this literature is largely confined to individual decision makers and so little work examining how collaborative cheating emerges has been done. Therefore, with this case study, we draw on various data sources (e.g., court case summaries, investigative reporting, technical reports, popular press outlets, and publically available employee interviews) and use case study methodology (i.e., grounded theory, open-systems diagnostics) to construct a process model that explains how collaborative cheating emerges in organizational settings. Theoretical and practical implications are also discussed.

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How Does Collaborative Cheating Emerge? A Case Study of the Volkswagen Emissions Scandal

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Abstract

Since 2014, Volkswagen (VW) has been enthralled in a reputation-tarnishing cheating scandal that has raised questions regarding how collaborative cheating unfolds in organizational settings. While the behavioral ethics literature provides some insights, this literature is largely confined to individual decision makers and so little work examining how collaborative cheating emerges has been done. Therefore, with this case study, we draw on various data sources (e.g., court case summaries, investigative reporting, technical reports, popular press outlets, and publically available employee interviews) and use case study methodology (i.e., grounded theory, open-systems diagnostics) to construct a process model that explains how collaborative cheating emerges in organizational settings. Theoretical and practical implications are also discussed.

1. Introduction

Many researchers extol the virtues of collaboration in organizational settings [1,2]. Collaboration has been defined as a process by which individuals with various backgrounds come together and, through interaction, information sharing, and coordination of activities learn and, ultimately, perform [2]. Collaboration is often viewed as a vehicle that facilitates ongoing learning, results in innovative strategies for competing in the marketplace, promotes diversity, and other positive outcomes for organizations.

However, there are times in organizational life when individuals within a team setting decide to cheat, and coordinate their activities as needed (e.g., students sharing tests to help their peers, scientists using questionable research practices to ensure a study gets published). Though we understand what drives individuals to cheat, such as the facilitating conditions (e.g., social norms) and individual differences (e.g., moral disengagement) [4-9], what compels individuals to contribute to and sustain a collective cheating effort

(i.e., collaborative cheating) is deserving of greater scrutiny than what has been done previously [e.g., 3]. This is partly because little research examines how unethical decision making occurs at the collective level [10]. One likely reason why little research exists on collaborative cheating is that studying it presents many problems that are not easily broached conventionally (e.g., experimental research), not the least of which involves gaining access to data on ethically and legally sensitive matters [11].

Given that organizations are increasingly relying on group decision making to compete in the marketplace, understanding what drives individuals to contribute to a collective cheating effort is critical. Recently, the Volkswagen emissions scandal, which involved many managers and engineers who helped create, implement, and conceal a device that would cheat emissions testing, provided scholars with the opportunity to understand how collaborative cheating emerges. Here, we use case study methodology to explain how collaborative cheating emerged at VW in order to form propositions regarding how this phenomenon emerges in organizational settings in general, providing direction for future study. To diagnose the causes of collaborative cheating at VW, we apply the open-systems model [12], a commonly used diagnostic framework in organizational research. This model acknowledges that organization's act on information in their larger environment, transforming inputs (e.g., human capital, materials) into outputs (e.g., goods, services, ideas) via transformation processes (e.g., social components, and technological components). How well these outputs satisfy constraints in the environment (e.g., regulatory needs and customer demands) serves as feedback for the organizational system, which can result in changes to the system or how it should be regulated. By applying this diagnostic model to our data, we hope to illuminate the numerous influences both inside and outside VW that contributed to the emergence of collaborative cheating.

We use case study methods for the following reasons. First, compared to quantitative approaches,