



The Fine Art of Complaining

Do you know there is a right way and an ineffective way to complain?

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Follow these steps to make the best use of your time – or you can pass it along to your direct reports so they can be prepared when they enter your office.

You, the Complainer

Preparation

1. Check your mental attitude. Are you in a powerless victim state or are you in a control-of-self state? While you are at it, check your posture (how you walk, stand and/or sit), your voice (tone, volume), your face (furrowed brows, squinty eyes, frown), and your thoughts (defeating from the start, reliving the 'wrongs' you felt were done to you). All can bring about or cause an immediate defensive reaction from others. Smile or imagine yourself smiling before you 'pounce'.

- a. Recognize the real and true root cause for your complaint. Usually it's because 'someone' did 'something' that you found offensive or bothersome. Identify your emotions that contribute to your thoughts and the underlying reason why.
- b. Analyze these thoughts. Yes, they are real to you. Are they a true reflection of what actually happened and what was said? We all have a filter that we use to interpret the words and actions of others. How 'clear' is your filter? For instance, how do you know that the other person intentionally set out to disparage you or make you look bad? Where or what is your proof?
- c. It's important that you not judge yourself. Emotions are not 'good', 'bad', 'positive' or 'negative'. They just 'are'. The mental filter we apply determines what they are. What is important is to acknowledge how strong or consuming these thoughts and emotions are.

Now you are in a better position to articulate your complaint in a professional and mature manner. Doing the above puts the brakes on your immediate and reactionary impulses and allows your executive-functioning brain to take over.

2. Lay out your 'argument' – write down your complaint and why you believe it's unfair or should be changed, or why you should get what you want. Now review it – how many times do you reference yourself or how it will affect you? How much of a concern do you think that is to others? You are right – usually not much. Frame your reasoning in terms of your team, your department or your organization – the benefits, the value or how it will affect them. Raise your concerns 'up a level' – what impact will it have on safety, time schedules, quality of work? In other words, convince the other person that you are presenting a solution 'for the greater good' (which you actually are). If you cannot do that, then perhaps you should keep your complaints to yourself (which also means do not share them – that could aggravate others and next thing you know you are not paying attention to your work because you are too busy feeding off each other's emotions).
3. Do not begin your conversation with "I have a complaint", "there is something we need to talk about or discuss" or "do you know what he/she did?" or even "I cannot work with him/her any longer" (These are actual phrases my clients have told me their direct reports have said to them). You immediately put the other person on the defensive. You position yourself as helpless and weak. You are looking for 'the boss' or someone else to make the situation better. Is that how you want to be seen?
4. Come prepared to offer at least one solution and explain the benefits the department will receive because of this solution. Offering two or three is even better – it shows you have thought through the situation, objective, open to negotiation and not steadfast in 'getting your way'.
5. Present facts and assumptions first. Do not lodge your complaint at the onset. Think of each point as a stepping stone towards your request and solution. This will bring to light any biases or erroneous assumptions you may have and give you the opportunity to alter your solutions or your complaints as you go. It also affords you the time to sense any 'dangerous' territory.

You are on the receiving end

Now that you know the most effective manner to raise your concerns, what happens when your direct reports come to you with a complaint? If they have not read the guidelines above, or if they are too distraught to think straight, you need to take control of the conversation and help them regain their mental and emotional composure. Here are some steps to help you help them:

1. Ask them “what happened?” then “what do you think happened?” This allows them to give you the facts (albeit by their perspective) and their interpretation of the events. The latter may be filled with conjecture and speculation (“they wanted to ...”). If you hear these types of phrases, your next question should be “how do you know (that was their intent or that’s what they wanted)?”
2. The longer they talk, the closer to the true cause for the complaint you will get. Keep suggesting they talk more ... “How so?”, “And?” are two ways that will help seed up their narrative.
3. Determine if any of their complaint or issue has any validity. Zero in on that or those areas to move them towards a solution (and out of your office).
4. Do not ask “What do you want me to do?” unless you are confident of their response. Instead, ask “If you were in my position, what would you consider doing? What action would you consider taking?” Be sure to include action that engages both the individual sitting in your office and others involved.

Other questions you can ask are “what else could they have been thinking?” or “what is another reason why they may have acted that way?” If the complainer is stymied, you can phrase it “Is it possible that <they were preoccupied, they did not know, or offer another reason why>?”

The goal is to hear the person’s view, allow them to vent and expel their anger, frustration, irritation and/or impatience, and to come to a rational, left-brained solution that encompasses safety, morale and effectiveness in the solution.

Uncovering the root cause

In every argument, every discussion and every conversation, there is some element of truth. There is also one sentence that is the crux of the entire conversation. Uncovering this one sentence, this one thought, will change the context of your discussion. It will also give you insights into the rationale behind their disruptive behaviors.

Before having any conversation or taking any action, ask yourself the following questions:

1. What is the basis for, or what caused the complaint?
2. Is the complaint valid? On a side note, how do you determine validity? Documented in a spreadsheet? Based on past experiences?
3. Is this person normally open-minded? Is this normal behavior for this person?
4. Are they vocal about their complaint or are they passive aggressive? Are they undermining what you are trying to do? If so, is it a specific action or your overall project?
5. Who else are they affecting by their actions, especially in terms of attitude, productivity, or safety?

6. When they complain, is it because

- a. Others are recognized for their efforts or successes?
- b. Someone challenges them, or the complainer sees the questions as a challenge? Do they feel they shouldn't have to explain or defend their views?
- c. They feel their other contributions are being negated?

It does make a difference

How you handle complaints and complainers speaks volumes to your leadership abilities. It also affects the trust others have in you. Do you want to be seen as apathetic, indifferent and preoccupied, or do you want to be seen as fair, concerned for your department members, and a leader they will follow? The choice is yours.

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