



Dealing with the Complainant in the Workplace

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There are people who complain about everything. This 6-page article focuses on seven things you can do to include the complainant and transform his behaviour

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Dealing with the Complainer in the Workplace

by [Brenda Kelleher-Flight](#) Ph.D.

Introduction

There are people who find fault with every idea. They like to blame someone for lack of progress or failure to meet targets or objectives. They find it easy to associate names with failures and have no difficulty pointing their finger at other people or at their boss.

These individuals are recognizable because they come across as if they are perfect and when something does not go 'right' for them they immediately assume the stance as the 'victim.'

There is a tendency to engage in one or more of the following behaviours in order to change a complainer's frame of reference and keep one's own frustration level in check. These include

- Helping him solve his problems
- Minimizing his issues
- Ignoring him in order to cope with his presence
- Nodding when he is talking
- Accepting his generalizations of the issues, or
- Tuning him out in order to move the agenda along.

These are not the best ways to cope with the complainer in the board room. This article focuses on seven things you can do to include this person and transform his behaviour from non-productive to productive. These are

- Refrain from solving the complainer's problems
- Ask open-ended questions
- Pay attention to him
- Remain neutral
- Ask for specifics
- Pay attention to the details, and
- Develop an action plan.

Refrain from solving the complainer's problems

Complainers do not want to stop complaining. If you try to solve their problems their resistance could easily increase and cause more havoc for you. They need to blame and your role is to recognize this and use strategies that demonstrate acceptance of this need. One of these is to ask open-ended questions.

Ask open-ended questions

One of the ways to diffuse the negative energy associated with complaining is to ask the complainer open-ended questions. These questions would assist you to determine the accuracy and reliability of the information he is presenting. Open-ended questions to gather information include:

1. What prompted this issue to come to the forefront at this time?
2. What are your (or of those you represent) expectations of me (the organization)?
3. What process did you use to determine that this is an issue I should deal with at this time?
4. How do you think I could deal with this issue? What are the options?
5. What would you like to see as a solution/resolution?
6. With whom do you think I need to consult and what data should be collected prior to making a decision?
7. What challenges and risks do you see associated with this issue?
8. How do you think this issue should be presented to the person who can accomplish the solution?
9. Do you have a timeline for action or resolution?
10. Is there other information I need prior to discussing this issue?
11. Would resolution affect the organization's plan, relationship with partners, or its budget?
12. Are there any actions the senior decision makers have taken which would indicate that this is not a priority issue at this time?
13. What specific challenges are you facing because of this issue?

14. What are the indicators that the organization has done everything in its power to resolve this issue?

If asking open ended question does not work, ask the complainer to place his concerns in writing and outline the specific issue from his perspective.

Pay attention

When you ask open-ended questions, you are demonstrating that you are paying attention. The complainer feels engaged and understands that you have sufficient information to decide if the concern needs to be addressed

- because the solution is within your sphere of control
- by someone else because it is outside your sphere of control but within your sphere of influence
- by someone else outside your sphere of influence and a request needs to be sent to that party
- because it has been resolved to your satisfaction and no further action is required at this time, or
- later because there are other more pressing issues which require the your attention.

If the issue is going to be placed on your agenda, it is critical that it is within your role to resolve the issue. If it is not, the issue would be referred to the appropriate person or body. The key is to remain neutral and listen to your colleagues responses.

Remain neutral

When a person remains neutral he does not lead, interrupt or prompt the complainer in any way. There are things to keep in mind to ensure your neutrality:

1. Stay calm and centered
2. Do not take sides
3. Refrain from making judgemental comments about the complainer's answers or information
4. If challenged, remind the complainer of actions you have taken in the past and focus on the present
5. Allow silence even though it may feel uncomfortable.

Remaining neutral does not mean you cannot ask questions. You can and should clarify any information you need in order to fully understand the concern and the desired solution.

Ask for specifics

Often what a person complains about is not the real issue. People complain about those things that they consider to be socially acceptable at the time. Unless the listener is skilled at asking for specifics, the real issue remains hidden. Questions to elicit specifics include;

1. From whom did you obtain this information?
2. How widely has this concern been expressed?
3. What are your sources of information?
4. What are the short- and long-term ramifications for you, if this issue is not resolved?
5. What are the specific risks for the organization?
6. Did you see that occur yourself or is this second-hand information?
7. Did you ask the other party for his version of the situation?
8. What are the long-term risks if I cannot address this issue at this time?

Pay attention to details

After a while it is easy to begin to ignore the complainer. However, there are times when he offers details that can be otherwise missed. These details could reveal political, social or financial risks that are essential for you to consider.

The key is to avoid getting drawn into the negative emotion and listen for information which is critical. It is vital for you to avoid wasting your limited time talking and determine whether or not you will act. This can be done by limiting the meeting time. When the discussion is finished you can begin to formulate your action plan.

Develop an action plan.

Now you are ready to

- leave the issue after determining it is beyond its sphere of control
- place the item on your calendar when required information is available or the timing for resolution would be better
- refer the issue to the appropriate party and ask to be apprised of the resolution, or
- write an action plan detailing who will do what, by what time, and the results desired.

The key is to keep asking questions during the full process and ensure the complainer does not remain in the complaining phase too long before moving to the resolution stage.

Final Comment

People can reap benefits from complaining. These include getting attention and gaining perks. Unfortunately, complaining is often seen as negative and can be very wearing on supervisors and colleagues. There are ways to constructively [handle complainers](#) without allowing them to derail your work schedule or the harmony within your team.

