Employee Complaints—and How to Respond

It's important to develop a strategy to listen to and act on complaints, harness their benefits and mitigate their destructive potential. When employees believe their manager doesn't care about, minimizes, or ignores valid concerns, it can increase stress, decrease engagement and ignite turnover.

Being dismissive of complaints can also damage the manager's — or the entire organization's — reputation, as seen recently with one CEO's now-viral town hall where she tells employees to "leave pity city" regarding their concerns about compensation. As Sigal Barsade and Olivia A. O'Neill put it, "Telling employees to 'put a lid' on [their] feelings is both ineffective and destructive; the emotions will just come out later in counterproductive ways."

Managers who are receptive to employee complaints foster trust and psychological safety with their people, which can ultimately boost organizational learning and performance. Further, employees who feel that they're heard can even be more engaged in their work and driving positive workplace change. Allowing for productive, solution-oriented complaints promotes creative problem-solving.

However, when unregulated, workplace complaining can give rise to negative consequences, such as "complaint contagion," where the negative mindset and emotions attached to certain forms of complaints can spill over to others and affect team and organizational culture. Ongoing complaints that provide no solutions (or that simply have no solutions) can also lead to learned helplessness and reduced productivity.

As a manager, you need to handle your team members' complaints with care. Here's how:

START WITH INTEREST AND CURIOSITY.

When you first hear of a complaint, be grateful to the messenger for showing trust in you to do something about it. Despite the message potentially being wrapped in negative emotions like frustration, disappointment, or even anger, employees who directly express their dissatisfaction to their manager are likely to be more committed than those who will turn to their peers or friends instead (using venting or malicious complaining, for example). That they're coming to you gives you the chance to identify the problem in the first place.

During the conversation, adopt a mindset of curiosity. Beware the false consensus bias, which can influence the attitude of "If I don't personally experience it, it must not be true" or "If it's not a big deal to me, it shouldn't be to them either." When an employee complains about a particular topic, consider the intention. Is the complaint intended to harm, or to fix a problem? Does it offer an opportunity or spark an idea for positive change? Is it a red flag for a future issue? Is it something that several employees have mentioned? Is the person just trying to be heard in venting about a situation that isn't particularly solvable?

If you're not able to decipher the intent behind the complaint, you might even directly ask the person, "What do you hope to achieve with your feedback, and how might I help you?" This can help employees make sense of why they're complaining and offer solutions for how you can support them.

ENCOURAGE AND HELP FACILITATE CONSTRUCTIVE COMPLAINTS.

Next, encourage perspective-taking and solution-oriented, productive complaining. For example, you might create opportunities at regular intervals for employees to provide feedback and ideas for improvement in constructive ways. Regular performance reviews also provide a structure for critical feedback from both sides and offer an opportunity to build psychological safety. Employees who know they have a clear opportunity to voice concerns about something they're dissatisfied about might just wait for the appropriate time and place instead of seeking out others behind closed doors, which can ignite complaint contagion and malicious complaining.

Installing a time buffer — a short pause to reflect on the grievance, its impact and potential solutions before having a conversation about it — can allow the complainer to articulate concerns with less negative emotion and thus more effectively. It can also allow the receiver to prepare resources and ideas for response. Also, consider having employees share some common concerns or complex matters in a trusted group environment, allowing everyone to express and consider alternative perspectives. To help employees take on more active, solution-oriented mindsets, recognize "helpful" complaints that provide pathways and improvement opportunities.

TACKLE DESTRUCTIVE COMPLAINTS.

It's critical to address the negative forms of complaints that can quickly undermine culture and teamwork. A team member who's "known" for malicious or ongoing chronic complaining might find that others get so tired of listening to them that potentially valid complaints get lost.

If you find an employee often complains about someone without any intention or desire to solve the problem, address the relationship, potentially through mediation or a constructive conversation. Employees aren't always aware of how their tone or negative mindset affects others and impacts culture, so simply addressing the behavior can be a big help in some cases. If the chronic complaining about a particular issue persists, especially if the problem isn't solvable, the complainer may need support to change their mindset and behavior to accept and better cope with the circumstances. If that isn't possible, they may need to make the decision to leave the situation (or, be asked to leave by the manager) so that they don't continue to infect the team's culture.

Complaining can have both positive and negative effects on organizational communication. Constructive complaining—or structured opportunities for employees to voice their concerns—offers valuable feedback to improve work processes, products and services, and thus should be encouraged. Venting and chronic complaining have both advantages and disadvantages for the individual and the group and should be given the right space and time, rather than being stifled. Malicious complaining only creates personal gain that harms others and the collective, decreases productivity, and creates a toxic work environment. By managing these different types of complaints with the appropriate behaviors, managers can create a positive, high-performing work environment while monitoring and containing the risks and costs of complaining for themselves and their teams.

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