

Dealing with Complainers

Gripe Gripe Gripe! What To Do About the Office Complainers

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Complainers are people who feel powerless to anything about their problems. They are an admitted pain in the neck because no manager wants to hear someone whine. And whining they do. They don't explode or attack they just gripe. They can also be cured. Here's how.

Understand the Why

Start by taking a look at the why of it all. Complainers are people who what the problems to get fixed but just view themselves as too weak to do the fixing. They look around for someone to do the job for them. They zero in on somebody whom they perceive to have more strength or authority, and they dump the problems on that person's plate. The person on the receiving end might be the manager, the lead worker or even a peer—anybody they think can step up the plate.

Mostly the problems they site are things that other people are doing to them and they spill it all out with run on sentences connected with and's and but's. And then they stop without offering any solutions. They are like seagulls who flap in from the great blue and dump their load and then fly off...into the sunset leaving the mess for someone to clean up.

There is a positive side to this situation. That is that complainers tend to focus on REAL problems. For this reason it warrants attention because it brings to the front circumstances that might otherwise not get heard. It's just that it's done in such an annoying way!

The Cure

To cure complainers, teach them to devise their own solutions. Convert them into problem solvers. To do that is to honor the complaint. Listen to it. That gets favorable attention because the complainers aren't used to be listened to. Once the issue is voiced and you understand it, say to the complainer, "ok I think I get it." Then feed it back to the complainer and ask "did I get it?" When the complainer says yes then say something like "ok now what can you do to make it better?" You probably will get the "deer in the headlights" look but ask the same question again. The complainer's response will probably be something like I thought you would fix this, I just told you that they wouldn't respond to me.

I usually ask the complainer if he / she has any control over the other person. They always say no that is the problem. Then I ask do you have any control over yourself? They hesitantly say yes. So the logic is that you work in the area that you have the most control. Ask for ideas that could solve the problem.

Beware. At this point the complainer is apt to cycle back to explaining the problem. Stop them and remind them that they said that you already understood the problem. They could also try to introduce a new problem. Stop them and say that's another 20 minutes for another day. Today we are focusing on the first problem. Restate your question: what can you do differently to fix the problem. What all this does if force the staffer into problem solving. This is the only possible route that the person has to achieve a positive outcome.

Rome wasn't built in a day

Don't take the easy way out and say "ok, I'll talk with so and so." Solving the complainer's problem just perpetuates the whining and dumping. Keep asking for solutions and offering suggestions and discussing why things will or won't work. Realize that the process could take several visits. This is a new experience for the complainer. No one has ever listened to them before. No one has ever pushed them to become a problem solver before. They are not used to assuming a powerful role. The overall goal is to transition them away from the weak role.

