

Go Beyond Complaints

by Elizabeth Speck

Have you ever noticed how most of us view complaints as problems?

No one wants to be a “complainer,” and nobody wants complaints from their subordinates, co-workers or bosses. But what if we took a different view of complaints? What if we started seeing them as gifts? Yes, gifts! Not only because they help us understand a situation that needs to be fixed, but also because complaints provide an opportunity to learn more about your co-workers—which can lead to improved relationships and teamwork, and a new level of success.

Why do people complain?

Contrary to the stereotype of the never-satisfied, ungrateful, spoiled, annoying-as-all-get-out whiner—people usually complain because they care. They care enough about a value, idea, or commitment they hold that when something gets in the way of that, they get upset—and they complain.

We hear it everyday: a co-worker incensed that his supervisor never holds others accountable for their work, a team leader disgusted with management over the reduction in resources for her current project, a subordinate convinced that her supervisor is penalizing her by giving her less desirable assignments.

What can we do differently?

When people are upset and complaining, it’s unlikely they see that their upset comes from a core value or belief they hold. They’re upset! Mad! Hurt! So what can you do? Listen differently. Instead of focusing on how to solve the problem, or how to make the complaint (and the complainer!) go away, listen for the commitment behind the complaint. Be empathetic, sympathetic, but at some point start to ask, “Why do you think this bothers you so much?” Sometimes people can answer that question, but not always. By listening and talking about it a bit, you may help them start to uncover why certain situations upset them so.

Speaking from one’s commitment—
instead of one’s complaint—
is a much more empowered approach
to effective problem-solving and to
initiating the conversations necessary to
get better results.

And what might all involved learn from this?

When people are able to look at their complaints in this way, sometimes they realize their upset comes from something other than just the immediate problem—which helps add context.

Sometimes people have an underlying commitment to, for example, “things being fair,” or to open communication, or to not looking foolish, or to having a meaningful relationship with their boss, or to keeping the promise they’ve made around a project deadline. Remember, commitments are as varied as individuals.

How can we make things better?

The difference is that by uncovering the commitment behind the complaint, people raising issues begin to see themselves not as people who complain, but as people who are committed—and others can see them that way, too. Speaking from one’s commitment— instead of one’s complaint—is a much more empowered approach to effective problem-solving and to initiating the conversations necessary to get better results.

Elizabeth Speck is an
associate with Pacific
Integral and a member
of the University
Consulting Alliance

Contact the Alliance at 206-616-8461 OR alliance@u.washington.edu.