Harvard Business Review

Managing People

4 Types of Employee Complaints — and How to Respond

by Alyson Meister and Nele Dael

May 03, 2023

Anton Vierietin/Getty Images

Summary.   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… **more**

Do you have a chronic complainer on your team? Most of us have worked with someone who can find something negative in every situation and loves to discover others who will commiserate with

them. (As the saying goes, misery loves company.) If you're on the receiving end of ongoing workplace complaints, you might be wondering how you should handle them. Do you ignore them? Express sympathy? Tell them to just "toughen up"?

Complaining — the act of expressing dissatisfaction or airing grievances — is an essential and often unavoidable aspect of organizational communication. Complaints tend to be viewed negatively and can be perceived as whining when the complainer doesn't propose a clear solution.

Indeed, when done ineffectively, complaining can harm the collective mood, individual relationships, and organizational culture. But when done effectively, complaining can help manage risks, provide early red flags, uncover opportunities for growth and change, and even boost relationships and well-being. Here we'll explore why employees complain, when and how it can be constructive or destructive, and offer some practical tips for managing destructive complaints and harnessing the constructive ones.

The Forms and Functions of Complaining

Different types of complaints have different underlying intents (both conscious and unconscious) and downstream effects. When faced with complaints from employees, start by identifying the type of complaining and its drivers:

Productive complaining Productive complaints are made with the intention of bringing to light and improving an undesirable situation. Productive complaints, also referred to as "voice," can result in valuable feedback that's necessary to change practices or behaviors that are harming the organization and to improve processes, products, and services.

For example, employee complaints about a lack of natural light in the office, an unsustainable workload, a new product's functionality, or a team member's inappropriate behavior can

highlight potential problems and generate ideas for positive change. To a manager who's willing to listen, productive complaints can offer valuable information and highlight problems that need to be addressed early before they spread through the organization.

Venting Venting is an emotional form of complaining where the individual — often vigorously — expresses their dissatisfaction about someone or something to others. The typical intent behind venting is to release bottled-up stress or frustration, or to seek allies (for example, to simply feel heard and acknowledged or generate support and buy-in for a particular issue).

On the positive side, emotional venting can provide temporary relief from distress. Suppressing negative emotions keeps our physiological activation high, which can have negative cognitive and health effects, such as increasing our chance for cardiovascular disease. Venting to a trusted colleague or coach can foster feelings of social support, decrease loneliness, and also help us gain perspective on a situation in a safe space before it's escalated.

That said, venting puts a double burden on the listener: first, to receive and handle the complainer's negative emotions (i.e., to support them in solving or coping with their issue), and second, to then deal with their own emotions or shared dissatisfaction with the issue. If this persists, it can result in exhaustion and empathy or compassion fatigue in the listener. Further, if venting becomes a widespread and habitual way to deal with unpleasant emotions instead of solution-oriented, productive complaining, it can ignite chronic stress and contribute to a negative emotional culture.

Chronic complaining Some people seem to complain about everything (the room temperature, their salary, their manager, the artwork in the lunch café…). Chronic complainers often have a more pessimistic or critical view of their role, their work, and the

world around them.

In this case, complaining reflects a mindset and attitude — not necessarily an objective problem. The social costs of this behavior are high, as listening to a chronic complainer zaps energy and those around them often quickly give up trying to help because it never actually seems to help; a new grievance replaces an old one.

One upside to chronic complainers is that these "troublefinders" can help surface potential red flags before they become widespread. For example, when introducing a new work from home policy, chronic complainers might offer the first insight into potential weak areas of the policy. Thus, chronic complainers shouldn't be ignored entirely: They'll either surface problems or eventually exhaust those they work with. Importantly, if you find a particular employee starting to habitually feel cynical about all things related to work, this could also be an important individual warning sign of impending burnout.

Malicious complaining Malicious complaining is a destructive form of complaining that's used to undermine colleagues or gain an unfair advantage. Some kind of personal (or group) gain, rather than dissatisfaction with an organizational issue, lies at the heart of this behavior.

Different than chronic complaining, however, malicious complaints serve the self at the expense of others. This type of complaining is often associated with gossip and backstabbing. If someone makes unfounded or exaggerated complaints or speaks against others with the (sometimes unconscious) intent to harm their reputation or career, or to increase their own status through downward social comparison, leaders must quickly take action. This type of complaining rarely has an upside — and it can create a toxic and psychologically unsafe work environment, lower team morale, and negatively impact productivity if it proliferates.

How to Handle Complaining at Work

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 offers 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.

Alyson Meister is a professor of leadership and organizational behavior at IMD Business School in Lausanne, Switzerland. She received her PhD from the University of Melbourne (MBS). Specializing in the development of globally oriented, adaptive, and inclusive organizations, she has worked with thousands of executives, teams, and organizations from professional services to industrial goods and technology. Her research has been widely published, and in 2021, she was recognized as a Thinkers50 Radar thought leader.

ND

Nele Dael is a senior behavioral scientist studying emotion, personality, and social skills in organizational contexts. She is leading research projects on workplace well-being at IMD Lausanne, focusing on stress and recovery. Nele is particularly tuned into new technologies for the benefit of research and application in human interaction, and her work has been published in several leading journals.

Recommended For You

Reducing Negativity in the Workplace
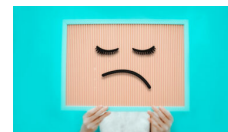
How to Figure Out How Much Influence You Have at Work
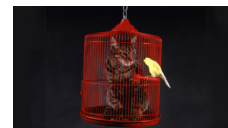
How to Give Negative Feedback to Your Peers, Boss, or Direct Reports

PODCAST
The Difference Between a Plan and a Strategy