



Surviving Complainers in the Workplace

In the spirit of being grateful, I thought I'd briefly address the opposite of having a thankful and positive disposition in the workplace. We all know that a real fast way to suck the teamwork energy out of the office is to be subjected to the sounds and frowns of chronic complainers.

It's true, an unceasing barrage of whiny and negative complaints can roll in the workplace like a thick, icy fog. It seeps through the walls and under the doors and sends a discouraging chill up the spine of those who are trying to do their jobs with a loyal and good attitude.

Now, to be sure, all of us at times can feel discontented with our jobs, question our roles and disagree with management's choices, but that's life wherever you work. What I'm speaking of is furrowed brow negativity being spewed all over other workers by a few discontented souls who have a pessimistic commentary over most of what happens from the top down. I just read that one Germany IT company put a ban on employees who were grumpy and whiny suggesting that they not come to work that day!

Complainers are not hard to spot. The unfortunate thing about what they suggest or say is that it can put a doubt in the thoughts of well-meaning co-workers and cause a squint-eyed questioning of others' motives and actions.

Characteristics of Complainers

- Consistent vocal discontentment with the way things are
- Questioning anything potentially positive that's being done
- Wrongly assuming that others want you gone
- Constantly ripping apart the motives and actions of leadership
- Threats of looking for another job with nothing to back it up
- Everything done in the office that they don't like becomes all about them
- A lack of joy and energy



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I was mediating a situation at an organization where the supervisor had grown sour with administration over the years. He had very little trust in leadership and was still disgruntled over being passed up on a promotion he wanted years earlier. His attitude affected the team under him and virtually polarized his particular division for years. He was smart, knowledgeable, and had years of expertise, but because he was a complainer and negative, nothing ever got better under his watch.



When I met with him I told him that his experience was appreciated and needed. I told him that he had tremendous influence over his crew (more than he thought), and that if anyone could turn the attitude of his division around, it would be him. I went on to say that administration was hoping to advance him because of his skill set, but only under the condition that he become a positive voice in the organization from this point on, or they would fine someone else.

Fortunately he chose to make the change and redirected his crew in an effective and positive way for the good of the organization.

A Word to the Discontented (Three Considerations)

Without oversimplifying a complicated issue for those who are complaining and discontented, it really is within your reach to go pretty quickly from a negative to positive attitude.

First of all, it is not healthy for you to go to work at a place every day that you hate. Eventually that level of discontentment can take over your life, conversations, and waking hours. Your family will say stuff like, “We want the old you back,” “Why are you always irritated?,” “Maybe you need to get a new job,” or, “Can we not talk about your work for a while?”

Secondly, it logically makes no sense to spend 30-40% of your life in an office that drains you daily. Actually enjoying your job makes for balanced living and creates a sense of personal satisfaction that can yield great rewards.

Thirdly, the choice is truly up to you. No one else can make you feel a certain way about you. If you are in an organization that will never improve, then find a new job. By the way, I have found personally, that working at a job that we love supersedes monetary benefits (although we must be reasonable with such a move). Who wants to work at a place that pays them well, but where life is so sour and exhausting that a beefy bank account doesn't help? Not me.

On the other hand, make the decision to get behind the organization, let past mistakes go, be a positive voice as much as realistically possible, and do your job with a loyal, uncomplaining heart. Another interesting note is that more companies promote because of attitude than degree or skill set.

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Surviving the Negative

So what do we do if the person next to us won't let their complaints go? Well, it depends if it is an isolated situation or a lifestyle.

- *Communication:* If the complaining is chronic, then discussion is necessary. There needs to be some format where the complaints are put on the table for analysis and discussion. Communication is the key. I tell management that the offices with the biggest gossip problems are ones that have poor communication channels from the top down. So we need to stop avoiding the elephant in the room and expose the concerns for all to see and discuss.
- *Don't Engage:* It really takes two to have a juicy gossip and complaint session. Tell the complainer you have been uncomfortable with where your discussions about work have been going lately. If this doesn't work, remove yourself from those types of discussions.
- *Direct them to the Right Source:* If you are in management, ask them if they have gone to the person directly to voice their complaint. If they haven't send them back to the right source. Whatever you do, don't intervene on hearsay or draw conclusions if they haven't addressed the issue on their own first. If the complainer is a co-worker and just needs to vent and find a solution, that's fine. If you perceive it's dominating their life at work, tell them the issue needs to be addressed with management or accept it and move on.

Never an Excuse to Stay Whiny and Negative

In his book, "Man's Search for Meaning," Viktor Frankl, who was a victimized prisoner in Auschwitz, one of the Nazi's concentration camps, experienced and saw treatment towards the Jews that was inhumane. The detail of the suffering was so intense and sad that I had to put the book down 50 pages in.

However, Viktor's conclusion after he found his freedom and survived the vicious ordeal was captured in his statement, "One's ultimate freedom is the ability to choose one's attitude in any set of circumstances."

Winston Churchill, also in the horrific face of the Nazi invasion in war-torn Europe, stated that "A pessimist sees the difficulty in every opportunity, an optimist sees the opportunity in every difficulty."

Now, if these two heroic men emerged out of one the darkest and saddest decades in modern history as ones who maintained a positive spirit, we can too. It is hardly possible that our work environment could ever be as unfair and harsh as mentioned above. So, as we prepare to close out another year and begin a new one, let's choose to do it right and be done with the complaining!



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Bill formed TeamWorks in 2001 to help organizations achieve their goals for establishing high morale and client satisfaction. TeamWorks currently specializes in offering one-on-one surveys and evaluations for management and staff to assess the current culture's needs and recommended trainings going forward.

In addition to conducting a variety of workshops and in-services on workplace issues, Bill mediates conflict among partnerships and staff relationships, speaks at conventions, facilitates management retreats, and offers personal consultation and counseling for staff.

Bill's strengths are in public speaking, mediation, and understanding the complexities of relational dynamics in the workplace. He lives in Medford, Oregon, with his wife Jenny, and enjoys spending time with their five children and five granddaughters.