

# How to Manage a Constant Complainer

By DIANNA BOOHER JULY 30, 2021



Complainers are convinced that your executive team, the dock workers, and the technicians stay up nights trying to figure out how to deceive them, ruin operations, and destroy opportunities.

And while HR professionals are known for their listening skills, unfortunately, some listen to complainers, mistakenly thinking empathy will build the relationship and eventually stop the whining. If you're of this mindset, please reconsider. Relentless commiserating about what "leadership" will or won't do, what may or may not change, what's fair or unfair will not get you free of the complainer. It only tends to infect you with the same bad habit.

So what can you do to disinfect yourself after exposure to a complainer?

## Try Humor

Whiners generally love company with their misery. So play "ain't it awful?" with the appropriate body language and matching sad stories — but with a light twist. Never minimize what the complainer sees as a tough situation. But as you tell your own sad facts, do so with a spirit of fun and a survivor spirit — as an overcomer rather than a victim.

The complainer may say this to you: "Are you sure this form you sent is the correct one? Half the time when I call your department, they send the wrong form and I have to do the paperwork all over again. The guy I talked to yesterday said he was going to email it as soon as we got off the phone and nothing ever came. I'm just making sure that what I got this morning is correct before I waste all the time to complete it."

Consider this kind of comment a "preventative" complaint. It's the whiner's way of keeping you on top of the details of a situation. Their motto: Complain before there's a foul-up so there won't be a foul-up.

## Use Your Complainer As an Intelligence Source

Redirect your complainer's focus from your own department, team, or organization: To a competitor. To a vendor. To the association. To the industry as a whole.

Just ask a few questions to get the complainer off and running: Who's putting pressure on the complainer to do what? Who are the big influencers persuading people to do what? Who has the power to turn the situation around? How?

Some more specific examples: "Do others on the team feel the same way you do about this process?" "Have you read other articles that point out the same negatives?" "Have you seen complaints about this on social media?" "Did anybody respond to those posts with good suggestions for solving the problem?" "Have you talked to your counterparts in other organizations — do they have the same issues?" "So what have they done to solve similar problems?"

You get the idea. Rather than feeling pressure to take action yourself, consider the complainer as a pipeline of information that you may not routinely hear.

## Collect and Share a Positive Perspective

When you see no real problem that warrants corrective action and think the complainer has simply been overcome by a bad habit, help the person adopt a new perspective. For example, send along positive comments from your colleagues to let the complainer know that co-workers have a different viewpoint.

Share positive blog posts, news quotes, awards won by the leadership team, studies mentioning your organization, surveys of the employee group as a whole, client testimonial emails and letters.

In other words, build the buzz. Collect the buzz. Share the buzz. Be the buzz. Eventually, realizing that the individual's negative views are not shared by the majority, the complainer may clam up.

## Offer to Pass on a Complaint to the "Powers That Be"

If a complainer continues to whine, probe to find out how serious the issue is by suggesting that they put their complaint in an email that you can pass on to the executive team through your channels. Granted, that's more work — and riskier — for them than simply grumbling to you. And that's the point. Your offer is in effect "put up or shut up."

## Pressure the Complainer to Act

An almost guaranteed way to stop the complainer: Apply pressure to get them to take action. Here's a generic flip-the-switch question: "So what are you planning to do about it?"

Example: The complainer says to you, "Well, it just happened again. Barb just told Jason he could take his two-week vacation this month. Never mind that she just announced in staff meeting this morning that no one could be off during these three peak months."

*Your flip-the-switch question:* "Hmm. So what are you going to do about it?"

*Complainer:* "What do you mean? Barb calls the shots."

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*Complainer:* "Wouldn't do any good."

*You:* Nod and do nothing. Or: "Well, if you do decide to say something, let me know."

Once the complainer understands that every complaint will elicit pressure for them to act, their enthusiasm for whining will wane.

Bottom line: If complainers take up far too much of your mindshare and time, increase the price for your listening shoulder.

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