

Why Exceptional Leaders Love Complaints...

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Complaints are one of the most common, unpopular and underrated forms of communication within an organization. Instinctively many of us treat them like warning alarms, signals that something is amiss with the complainant or the organization and requires our attention. As assertive leaders, we hear the complaint and take action.

For example, a complaint may appear to challenge our authority and provide evidence that the complainant is unwilling to follow direction, so we move powerfully to control him. A complaint may signal that a complainant is less than “on board” with an idea and unlikely to pull her weight in implementing it, so we move purposefully to conform her. A complaint may even reveal a more habitual dissenter, a “bad apple” that could spoil the bunch, so we move quickly to quarantine or cull him before more damage can

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be done. The very term “complainant” betrays how quickly and comfortably we link a person’s identity or character to this particular linguistic mode. Complaining migrates easily in our minds from simply what a person does to who a person is, and the alarm it sounds is both operational and interpersonal. For all our commitment and initiative, we become merely reactionary; the alarm sounds, we jump. This kind of Pavlovian leadership stems from an overly simplistic view of complaints.

Complaints are not always signs of trouble. In fact, they are present even in the most productive organizations filled with highly motivated, deeply loyal men and women. They are a natural, even requisite, part of organizational behavior and any collaborative effort, and are an inescapable part of every leader’s experience. But let’s face it, they aren’t much fun. The interactions prompting and prompted by them are usually not a leader’s proudest moments. Complaints can annoy and discourage both the leader and the led, but they can also provide precious feedback, insight, and opportunity for individual and collective development. As a result, the most effective leaders maintain a respect and even appreciation for the positive role complaints play in their work and show insight and creativity in responding to (and even provoking) them

The confounding truth is that complaints are exactly as overt, surface, and simple, as they appear to be just often enough to tempt us to believe that is all they ever are, but there is far more to most complaints, and complaints offer far more to us if we will reconsider their role in the life and leadership of our organizations.

Complaints Illuminate and Establish “Givens” In the Organizational Culture.

Complaints arise everywhere in an organization from the mail room to the board room, between competitors and colleagues. (My own experience suggests that complaint levels rise with proximity to vending machines and designated smoking areas but fall off precipitously near formalized suggestion boxes and staff survey collection points.) Some of the most frustrating complaints are those voiced to a “third party”, to someone who is uninvolved and disconnected from the circumstance prompting the complaint. To leaders, this variety seems particularly annoying and unproductive because it involves people without personal influence or investment in the situation. In other words, it appears directed more at simply airing frustration or fomenting disagreement than in actually improving the circumstances that prompt it.

Most leaders are understandably wary of such interaction; they know it can be the kind of rabble-rousing communication that fuels dissent and incites mutiny. It presents a genuine threat to the leader’s efforts to foster change or cultivate a consensus around new aspirations and standards. Exceptional leaders, however, recognize that these apparently negative water-cooler moments can also provide the verbal reinforcement that acknowledges organizational “givens”, reveals collective assent, and ultimately strengthens group norms. Sometimes the signs of progress that the leader looks for most, come disguised in the voice of complaint.

Let me offer an example free of the organizational complexities we face at the office. In my home, my wife and I instituted a new “policy” that limited dessert to the weekends. No organizational redirection was ever met with more disdain and general push-back. A week after announcing our new plan, my daughter finished her dinner, sighed and said, “I’d ask for ice cream, but I know it’s a school night...” This low grade passive-aggressive sort of complaint was a thinly-veiled attempt to register dissatisfaction and check the parameters of a previous decision. However, it was also valuable evidence that the decision was clearly understood and recognized as a persisting part of our family culture.

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In a more formal organizational environment it looks very similar. I worked hard to create a “culture of evidence” within our division and asked personnel to incorporate and present data more effectively in decisions, reports and proposals. Consequently, I found myself regularly rejecting or returning documents that lacked this kind of evidence. One day, while passing the copy room, I overheard one director say pointedly to another, “...You know he’ll ask for a some kind of a graph or a table...”

A certain level of frustration was packed into this statement. While the words weren’t so bad, the eye-rolling and disapproving tone of voice left no doubt as to the speaker’s disposition. Veiled or not, it sounded like a complaint to me, and I was faced with a choice. I could interpret the speaker’s lack of enthusiasm or disrespectful tone as a challenge to my authority, or I could look past the statement itself and discover evidence of a new disposition, an affirmation of our success in moving towards a culture of evidence. After all, people were now reminding each other to include data in their reports, and I was no longer the lone voice crying out in the wilderness, “Data! We need data!” After a closer look, my estimation of the comment went from “bad news” to “good news”. It revealed that while my personal penchant for data was not necessarily shared by others, the new expectation was quietly developing from a fleeting personal preference into a predictable organizational “given”.

Complaints Exorcise Frustrations That Stand in the Way of Performance

The greatest threat to an organization's progress lies less in the likelihood that people might disagree with the direction it's going than that they might be distracted from it. When people are focused, they are marvelously able to perform even in the service of decisions and directions with which they disagree, but when their attention and energy are unfocused or focused elsewhere, they are unable to contribute meaningfully to even their fondest aspirations. In such a situation, it is not the disagreement people feel that cripples them; it is the frustration that arises from feeling out of control and victimized. This kind of inner conflict is a leader's enemy because it can quickly consume a person's thoughts and emotions and leave nothing left to work with.

For this reason, perceived pressure to conform mentally and emotionally can be more debilitating to individuals and organizations than the loftiest expectations of performance. People frequently find it easier

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to contribute to something they do not entirely support than to something they feel forced to “believe in” against their will. Counter-intuitively, allowing someone to disagree with a decision can free them up to contribute more effectively to carrying it out.

Make no mistake, this is a delicate and dangerous truth. Exceptional leaders are not content with mere compliance from their teams-- they are diligent and adept at cultivating believers rather than mere followers through their influence-- but they know that dissent is not always a sign of disengagement. Effective collaborative effort requires the ability to contribute meaningfully to collective goals even when those goals differ from an individual's own. Tolerating some expressions of this dissonance actually enables team members to commit their

energy and activity fully to the group's success without being distracted by the pressure to give up their own opinions and values en route. It allows them to intentionally choose the advancement of group goals over their own. While leaders need team members who are cognizant of and committed to their own values and aspirations, their ultimate success depends upon members' willingness to selectively subjugate those personal priorities for the sake of collective aims.

Many people carry on long animated conversations in their heads in which they set their bosses straight and say the critical things they've been longing to say out loud. I have a friend whose coping strategies for conflict include a long run during which he stages a dramatic confrontation in his imagination and plays it out part by part as he pounds the pavement. At the end of his physical exertion, he has successfully exorcised the emotional conflict constraining his overall “fitness”. This is not to say, he has necessarily reversed or given up his previous personal perspective. Quite the contrary, his new “fitness” and ability to move forward are frequently born of his enthusiastic reaffirmation of that perspective and the deliberate choice to temporarily set it aside rather than to overthrow it.

Complaints Reveal Inner Concerns and Commitments

Ultimately, complaints are born in the conflict between a person's inner needs and commitments and the external circumstances, challenges, or constraints he experiences. These inner dispositions are invisible to a leader, and frequently remain unconscious and unexamined by the person himself, but they are the real movers and shakers of individual and organizational activity. They quietly but powerfully shape our sense of

satisfaction and move us to individual and collective action. Complaints provide windows into this hidden world and give leaders a glimpse at a person's inner commitments, values that are often abstracted or hidden in surface communication. Complaints tell us what makes a person tick.

At the heart of most complaints is a statement of conviction, of what matters most to a person, of where his/her priorities really lie. This makes complaints a precious source of data for leaders. Leaders work hard to shape the values of those they lead, to instill regard for common goals, enthusiasm for common

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aspirations, etc. so they must pay close attention to what people value and how they feel, and they expend considerable time, energy, and money seeking reliable feedback on the success of their efforts— employee surveys, focus groups, performance conferences, etc. Some of the most genuine and reliable data on individual's values is presented to them every day in the form of complaints, but as important as this information is, it is easy to miss because it is embedded in a linguistic construction that turns us off.

Exceptional leaders learn to look past this aversion and listen more deeply to complaints because they know people are naturally adept at this form of communication and predisposed to employing it when circumstances threaten or contradict the things they care about. They see past the elevated level of emotion or depressed level of rationality, and discover the unusual candor and vulnerability hidden in the mix. Looking past the surface of the complaint provides a dramatically different perspective and an opportunity to respond more effectively. A grasp of what lies beneath and behind a

complaint allows the leader to form more accurate opinions and choose better courses of action than those spurred by the complaint itself.

For instance, a woman's complaints about being assigned a large project at work may reveal a commitment to equitable workloads rather than an anemic work ethic. A man's complaints about working weekend hours may reveal his commitment to family and other prioritized relationships rather than an inability to “go the extra mile”. A person's complaints about being asked to make politically motivated exceptions may reveal deep ethical allegiances rather than simple recalcitrance or naiveté. Exceptional leaders hear the difference, and act to affirm or reframe inner dispositions appropriately.

Unfortunately, it takes reflection and a follow up question or two to reveal important distinctions, and this is the last thing most of us want to do when faced with a complaint. Instead, we try to quash it or conform it immediately. Interestingly, this response betrays our own repertoire of unfortunate inner dispositions like: complaints constitute challenges to be overcome efficiently rather than opportunities to be explored effectively; control is preferable to understanding, compliance is more valuable than commitment.

Exceptional leaders are disposed differently; they see complaints as windows of opportunity. They resist the urge to control the complaint and let it play out a little— after all, they can always cut it off later if things become unproductive. In the meantime, they try to transform the complaint into a conversation. Their first response to complaints is often a question inviting more information “Why do you feel this way?”, “What is it about this decision that upsets you most?”, “How does this affect your experience?” then they listen carefully for clues to the commitments beneath the complaint. Their ability to speak to those hidden commitments directly or indirectly during the remainder of the conversation is the difference between truly hearing or merely humoring others, and ultimately determines whether they will lead people and projects effectively or simply react to them.