



Working Resources

Helping Companies Assess, Select, Coach and Retain Emotionally Intelligent People

Newsletter

From Complaints to Commitments

What are people complaining about in your organization?

“We never have a chance to really talk about the big picture of our work. We’re under so much pressure to deliver what is needed now. There’s little opportunity to understand how things tie in with larger goals; consequently, there’s no breathing space for creativity or innovation.”

“There’s too much talking behind one’s back here. People talk about others, but rarely to others. If I knew and had a chance to talk to the person with a complaint, then we could confront the issues and work on solutions.”

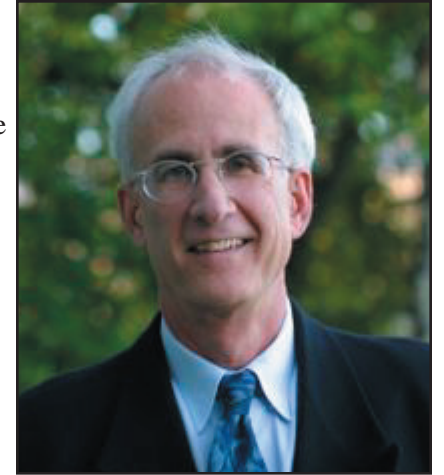
The objects of disaffections may vary but griping is always in season at work. When things go from bad to worse the discussions end up in the manager’s office. When they don’t, they form an undercurrent of discontent and resentments that is counter-productive.

People spend vast amounts of time complaining. They invest amazingly creative energies coming up with clever ways of expressing their discontent. No matter how sophisticated, however, a complaint is unpleasant to listen to. It can instill an aura of negativity and un-productivity. It becomes contagious. At its worse, it poisons relationships and sabotages team efforts.

A review of journals and books yields little on the subject. That is, not until Robert Kegan and Lisa Laskow Lahey wrote, *How the Way We Talk Can Change the Way We Work* (Jossey-Bass 2001). They term complaints in the office as “BMW” talk: bitching, moaning and whining. Or, “NBC” talk: nagging, bitching and complaining.

Ask any group of people how they could be more supported at work and you’ll get prime examples of BMW. Sometimes the complaints are made with head-shaking amusement, sometimes resentment and resignation. They are made by people who love their jobs, hate their jobs; by those that are good at their jobs, not so good, new at work, and near retirement. Criticisms are levied at bosses, subordinates, peers, “them,” and occasionally at oneself.

Dr. Maynard Brusman is a consulting psychologist and trusted advisor to the senior leadership team. He is the president of Working Resources, a human resources consulting, training, and executive coaching firm.



We specialize in helping companies assess, hire, coach and keep top talent; executive selection; leadership consulting; 360-degree feedback; change management; interpersonal communication skills; emotional intelligence; performance improvement; culture surveys; career development and executive coaching.

Dr. Brusman is a highly sought-after speaker and workshop leader. He leads mission, values, and vision retreats.

“Maynard Brusman is one of the foremost coaches in the United States. He utilizes a wide variety of assessments in his work with senior executives and upper level managers, and is adept at helping his clients both develop higher levels of emotional intelligence and achieve breakthrough business results. As a senior leader in the executive coaching field, Dr. Brusman brings an exceptional level of wisdom, energy, and creativity to his work.”—Jeffrey E. Auerbach, Ph.D., President, College of Executive Coaching

He has been chosen as an expert to appear on radio and TV, MSNBC, CBS Market Watch, and in the Wall Street Journal, San Francisco Chronicle, and Fast Company magazine.

Working Resources

55 New Montgomery Street, Suite 505
San Francisco, California 94105

San Francisco and Marin locations

Telephone: 415-546-1252

Toll free: 800-993-3354

Fax: 415-721-7322

E-mail: mbrusman@workingresources.com

Website: www.workingresources.com

We all complain, no matter what our position. No matter what the particular content of complaints, it turns out that most of us have an experience at work that we perceive as obstructing our own well-being, growth and development.

This conversation about what we can't stand is so universal it goes unrecognized and accepted as normal. Obviously we recognize complaints from others more so than from ourselves. Complaining grows like a weed. The problem is that it does not usually lead to changing anything.

To be fair, complaining may help people let off steam. It can also create alliances and support because one realizes they are not alone. But it rarely accomplishes more than this. It doesn't transform anyone or anything. It often leaves people feeling worse by virtue of the negative feelings that flourish.

Why Complaints are Important

It is important to pay attention to complaints because they contain a seed of passion! For every statement of what a person can't stand, there is an underlying reason, or statement about what they stand for.

Where there is passion there is possibility for transformation. There is energy and there is commitment. People do not complain about what they don't care about. So underneath the complaint, there is a river of committed passion and a source of energy to be discovered and harnessed...if we look for it and ask about it!

Leaders and managers are faced with complaints all the time. Here are some typical responses:

1. **Explaining:** Acknowledge the person's complaint and give them more information that would explain the situation and provide another perspective.
2. **Empathizing:** Acknowledge the person's complaint by actively listening and empathizing with them in order to help them to accept the situation.
3. **Problem-solving:** Acknowledge their complaint and try to explore solutions using problem-solving methods. Depending on your leadership style, you will direct or coach them to take action, or you might take the monkey on yourself by agreeing to do something to fix the problem.

What if there were a different approach to handling complaints, one that actually encouraged people to stay with the problem in order to pursue meaningful transformation?

Kegan and Lahey suggest asking this important question:

What sorts of things, if they were to happen more frequently in your work setting, would you experience as being more supportive of your own ongoing development at work? In other words, what do you really need to thrive?

Complaints to Commitments

What commitments or convictions do you hold that are implied in your complaint? What value is not being honored? What commitment do you have that is not being fully recognized by this situation?

In every complaint there is a value that is not being honored and it is usually the absence of this personal value that is rubbing the person the wrong way. Hence there is passion in complaints. Unlock the underlying value and there is productive conversation about what needs to be done in order to create meaningful change.

What if leaders could feel comfortable enough to listen to a complaint without explaining, empathizing and trying to solve the problem? What if they took the time to explore for the unfulfilled values and commitments inherent in the BMW talk?

Rather than seeing complaints as problems to be solved, dissolved, suppressed and squashed, Kegan and Lahey present an invitation and a challenge to leaders to make use of their energies. Complaints might be seen as a gateway to identifying and giving voice to personal commitments at work. It is a way to identify what people stand for, not just what they can't stand.

Language Communities

Work settings are language communities in that structure, boundaries, norms and culture are organized linguistically. The importance of language and the way groups speak about themselves and their work cannot be overemphasized. In that sense all leaders are leading language communities. Though every person, in any setting has some opportunity to influence the nature of the language, leaders have exponentially greater access and opportunity to establish and influence others through the use of language. The only question is what kind of language leaders will choose to use.

Equally important is the language we use in our self-talk. Although too rarely considered, the conversation within is one of the most influential forces of behavioral regulation. Through our internal language, we create continuous forms of feelings and thoughts that ultimately lead to our actions. When you consider the three internal operating systems of feelings, thoughts and language, language is the easiest to change. When we change the way we talk about something, we have a greater chance of changing our feelings and thoughts because of our natural desire to be congruent. Ultimately, our behaviors change because we have changed the way we think, feel and talk. To be inconsistent between these systems creates cognitive dissonance— that uncomfortable feeling of not “walking the talk.”

The authors point out that leadership is a widespread phenomena in business: “For every chief executive presiding at the top of some organization or enterprise, there are a thousand men and women called upon to exercise temporary or sustained leadership over a project or team within an organization.” Furthermore, leadership is about supporting and helping communities (organizations and teams) change through the use of language. It is with the language we use that we manage our relationships with each other and with organizations.

We are all leaders at one time or in one way. We are all challenged by being stuck and blocked from creating changes that we say are important to us. We are all seeking language through which we can communicate more effectively and influence the decisions that others make, particularly when they relate to what is important to us.

The fact is that all of us are confronted with challenges when it comes to development and change. While it may be that sometimes this is because we have difficulty learning something or we attach a loss to shifting to something new, in all cases it is because we are committed to something. There is something we value that we are protecting. In the world of business and organizations this protective behavior often shows up as complaining and various forms of discontent. It depletes work energy, negatively impacts retention of talented people and at its extreme breeds anti-organizational behavior such as sabotage.

Changing Language

Kegan and Lahey present a methodology to provide new meaning to complaints and to elicit the underlying commitments that can provide passion and energy for changing behaviors. Through the use of this new methodology each of us, leaders all, can begin to shift our own behavior and our relationships with others in the organization from complaining to commitment and effective change. Equally important, their methodology is respectful of ourselves and of others, while honoring our capacities to learn. It offers a path to a learning process that holds the hope of increasing our effectiveness in our organizations without adding another oppressive high-performance demand on us.

Their methodology asks the complaining person to explore what they are doing or not doing that contributes to their commitment not being fully realized. Next, the question is what other competing commitment do they have that may be preventing the first commitment from being realized? In other words, in order to make true meaning out of any complaint, one must recognize that human beings are complex and hold competing values and commitments at the same time. Otherwise, change would be easy. Exploring this complexity leads to expanding the problem rather than solving it, but results in a more comprehensive understanding of the real issues and what really matters. The final step is to examine the underlying assumptions that are behind one not following through with commitments.

Kegan and Lahey use a five step process for making meaning out of complaints. The use of this model for exploring complaints is a valuable tool for leaders. Working through one’s own complaints can help executives to a deeper understanding of the multiple meanings that must be recognized before transformational change can occur.

Five Steps: Transforming Complaints to Commitments

Source: Kegan, R. & Lahey, L. (2001). *How the Way We Talk Can Change the Way We Work; Seven Languages for Transformation*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Step one: Write down your answers to the following question: “What sorts of things, if they were to happen more frequently in your work setting, would be more supportive of your ongoing development at work?”

Step two: pick just one you feel strongly about and complete the following sentence...”I am committed to the value or the importance of...” For example, if your answer to Step One was “I don’t get feedback” then “I am committed to getting feedback.”

Step three: consider your own part in the situation, by answering this question: “What am I doing or not doing that prevents my commitment from being fully realized?”

Step four: consider that you may have other values that are competing with your step one value or commitment: “I may also be committed to...” (This is usually something self-protective.) For example, “I am committed to getting feedback but I am also committed to not being vulnerable.”

Step five: look at the reasons for holding the competing value stated in step 3 by finishing the statement: “I assume that if...” (if I do seek feedback, then I might be vulnerable and be hurt).

To bring about actual change, we must do more than just become aware of our paradoxes. We must disturb the balance, not merely look at it. This map creates a more complete and comprehensive space in which to consider and experience a problem. Far from solving the problem, we expand it.

Why? For one thing, it will prevent us from wasting time, energy and money on solutions that might be highly ineffective because the problems will just recur in differing forms.

On a psychological level, we create movement from subject to object...the movement of our meaning making is from a place where we are its captive to a place where we can look at it, reexamine it, and possibly alter it. This is what leads to genuine transformation.



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Dr. Maynard Brusman

Consulting Psychologist and Executive Coach

Mail: P.O. Box 471525

San Francisco, California 94147-1525

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