

Turning complaints into requests

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- Are you in a company where complaining is a prevailing part of employee interactions?
- Are you a manager who spends time managing complaints?

It is important to first recognize that complaining is a pattern that undermines team.

Managers and leaders become empowered by interrupting and redirecting complaints into powerful, actionable, requests. In this article we are going to share a couple of practical tips that you can use to start setting your team up for success.

If your employee comes to you with a complaint:

#1. Ask Two Questions Before You Make Any Statements

#2. Replace Complaints with Requests

#1 Ask Two Questions Before You Make Any Statements

Many times managers get “sucked in” to complaints by rushing to respond to the complaint. Trying to deny, defend, or diffuse the complaint actual ends up contributing to the complaint. Stop this pattern by simply asking two questions before you make any statements.

“What do you need/want?”

“How can I help you?”

These two simple questions (when coupled with a curious and generous tone) never get old and always hold the promise of possibility. If you are really willing to probe these questions, when a person approaches you with a complaint, you can eventually reset the context of the conversation and shift the focus toward sound solutions and positive possibilities.

TIP: As a manager, be diligent about staying in the inquiry and allow your direct reports to uncover and discover their own solutions. Try not to solve people’s problems—empower your people to create and generate what they want/need. You can do this by resetting the context and shifting the focus forward.

The unconscious goal of most complaining is not to solve problems or get what a person wants. The goal of complaining is to “be right” about a person’s patterned beliefs. Psychologists call this “confirmation bias.” Simply put, people unconsciously filter their experience looking for evidence that confirms their limiting beliefs about what is possible and how the world works. Managers who rigorously stay in the inquiry make it difficult for people to remain stuck in their complaints. Asking questions is the most effective way to shift the focus toward

positive and constructive possibilities.

Other examples of powerful questions you can ask that can consistently shift the conversation forward are:

“What do you want to think or feel?”

“What do you want to create or generate?”

The focus of the conversation is forward, toward a positive future, rather than rehashing and recycling disappointments from the past. The context of what a person wants to create is incompatible with the negative patterns from the past (i.e. the complaints)—thus, defining and declaring what a person wants automatically requires that person to view and do things differently. Conscious and deliberate choices and practices ultimately replace repeating unhealthy patterns.

#2 Replace Complaints with Requests

In our Group to TEAM live trainings and management coaching, we will ask for employees and managers to agree to practice replacing complaints with requests. A “no complaints, only requests” standard is a very helpful step in the process of interrupting a culture of complaining. Managers and employees agree that rather than complaining about what a person doesn’t want they should make a request that aligns with what they DO want. This practice is again rooted in asking questions. Asking for what a person wants/needs is a significant adjustment when people are in the habit of complaining. Managers and employees can support each other to be rigorous in upholding this “complaints to requests” standard. To shift from a complaint to a request you can use the following questions:

“Do you have a request?”

“Would you like to make a request?”

“How can you enroll (the person that you are complaining about) in a common goal by making a request?”

Leading to team is never about managing tasks or time. In fact, it isn’t even about managing people. It is about managing context and focus. When employees are empowered to identify and pursue what they want to create and generate both individually and collectively, the results are often remarkable. Shifting complaints into requests is a major step in developing a highly creative and rewarding culture of TEAM. Turning a complaint into a request could be just a couple of questions away.

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