

Employee complaints: What to address and what to ignore

Alice has no qualms about telling everybody in the office that she puts in way too many work hours. Dan and Rob are not the most vocal employees, but you did notice them huddled together whispering after a staff meeting and caught the phrase “stupid company policy” before they saw you rounding the corner. Rhonda rolls her eyes every time an assignment calls her to work with Andrew. And Michelle wears her winter coat inside most of November through March in protest that her side of the building does not receive sufficient heat.

Most managers know that dealing with employee complaints comes with their job description, like it or not. From passive-aggressive behavior and small digs to long-winded speeches and maybe even a group protest, workers find ways to air their grievances.

The question for leaders becomes how to handle employee complaints. Giving team members a voice improves morale and engagement. But, on the other hand, a work environment plagued by constant negativity puts a damper on company culture. How do you strike an effective balance?

Employee complaints never to ignore

Some types of employee complaints *always* merit attention. Ignoring them sets the stage for trouble – lawsuits, accidents, intervention from federal agencies, brand damage, and other potentially devastating consequences. Hear out and take necessary action for complaints that involve the following:

Safety issues

As the U.S. Department of Labor notes, federal labor laws entitle workers to safe working conditions. Employers must keep workplaces free of known health and safety hazards. Furthermore, employees have the right to speak up about potential dangers without fear of retaliation. Better to address any possible problems before they turn into formal complaints with the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA). Or, even worse, people get injured or killed.

Harassment

Simply put, harassment is against the law. Victims claiming sexual harassment or other types of mistreatment on the basis of membership in a protected class — such as gender, sexual orientation, race, religion, national origin, age, or disability — may decide to take legal action.

Discrimination

According to [EEOC.gov](https://www.eeoc.gov), the U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission processes about 80,000 job discrimination complaints each year. Smart employers look into charges well before things reach this stage, and they document all of their efforts.

Create outlets to voice complaints

People experiencing problems impacting their physical or mental well-being need to be heard. They also must feel confident that those in management and human resources will take them seriously and treat them respectfully.

Your organization's employee handbook should lay out the complaint process in detail. It should tell workers where to turn to lodge specific complaints. It also should provide information on what to expect in terms of follow-up and what to do if dissatisfied with results. Make certain that your complaint procedures fully advise remote workers, too. Complaints necessitating attention can happen off-site as well as on.

Many employee complaints are not things that require formality and involvement from the HR department. Still, offering a chance to present these gripes and annoyances can build better employee relations. And, managers who truly listen to what is said may gain valuable insight.

Possible set-ups to voice complaints include:

- A suggestion box
- Dedicated time at staff meetings
- An open-door policy
- Regular, anonymous surveys

Common employee complaints

As any manager can attest, employee complaints run the gamut. The nature of the industry, group dynamics, and individual personalities all can influence what people express and how they do it. Some employee complaints, though, seem to pop up rather frequently in all types of workplaces. Here is a look at ones managers often encounter and tips on dealing with them.

Too much work

Yes, some employees are lazy or just like to whine. However, the possibility exists that the complainer has a legitimate point. Especially in short-staffed workplaces, demands may be unreasonably heavy.

Overwhelmed employees burn out, and many quit. Do not take that risk. Make time to evaluate individual and collective workloads. You may need to redistribute tasks or put some goals on the back burner temporarily.

That's not part of my job

When creating a job description, employers typically include the phrase "other tasks as assigned" after listing common responsibilities. Bring that line to the disgruntled employee's attention. It also might prove a good time to emphasize that the organization prizes flexible, team-oriented employees willing to pitch in wherever needed.

A manager who keeps hearing this complaint too often, though, may want to examine the situation. The utterer may have a point that her duties are swaying increasingly far from what she was hired to do. Or, she might be frustrated and burned out from regularly being asked to take on more. Heartfelt recognition of efforts (and

maybe even a raise) might be in order.

Not being paid enough

While this is an evergreen complaint, The Great Resignation brought to the forefront the possibility that better opportunities could exist elsewhere. Employers worried about retention may want to evaluate their pay scale to ensure it meets industry standards.

It also can help to provide staff members with information about how the company determines pay increases. Outline how factors such as years of service, education, and certification affect salary. Such information gets rid of feelings of favoritism and shows a path to higher compensation.

So-and-so gets away with stuff

Speaking of favoritism . . . few things get an employee's goat as much as the impression of unequal treatment. Managers getting wind of this complaint should examine their behavior. Do you let the wrongdoings of certain people slide? Do you enforce terms stated in the employee handbook across the board? If not, you set the stage for this complaint. And, should a former employee pursue legal action down the line for some reason, his case gains strength if able to prove inconsistent treatment of employees with similar offenses.

Not wanting to work with a particular colleague

Most everyone has co-workers that they prefer to team up with and others they would rather avoid. Work styles and personalities sometimes jive, and sometimes they clash. Smart managers find out if this is the case or if problems run deeper. The possibility exists that Worker A does not want to be around Worker B because of belittling, harassment, or bullying — and action must be taken.

Bureaucracy

Employees often gripe about the way management wants something done. Grumblings could just be letting off steam, or they could be opportunities for improvement.

Explain why things are done a certain way or the reasoning behind specific company policies. Employees may complain less when they understand the rationale. But also be open to suggestions. Those doing tasks first-hand may actually have a better or more efficient idea than what is in place. Take some time, too, to evaluate whether some methods might be outdated or in need of improvement, especially in light of the increase in remote work.

It's too hot in here, too cold, too stuffy, too noisy, too dimly lit . . .

Like winter-coat-wearing Michelle in the opening, employees can have strong opinions about their work environment. Managers know they cannot please everyone all of the time. However, comfortable workers perform better. Consider their complaints. Maybe it is time to contact maintenance about heat problems, invest in ergonomic chairs, or switch to a different type of light bulb.

Create a positive environment

While complaining simply can be a part of human nature, watch that it does not turn your office into a constant pity party. Morale can plummet when it seems like all staff members do is talk about what is wrong.

Ways to combat the problem include:

- **Hire positive people.** Watch out for job candidates who spend way too much time talking about the ills of their previous employers.
- **Frame problems in terms of finding solutions.** Instead of letting complainers go on and on unproductively, challenge them to come up with ways to improve or cope.
- **Watch how much you complain.** Your tone influences the general mood.
- **Acknowledge good things.** Happy observations, words of encouragement, and genuine appreciation help drown out negativity.