

THE LEADER

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Dealing with the Complainer

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“If you don’t like something change it. If you can’t change it, change your attitude. Don’t complain.”

- Maya Angelou

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When we picked our topics for the various publications at the beginning of the biennium, we weren’t sure which one of us would write each article or where we might find the information. We’d like to acknowledge the amazing resources available on the Internet. Using Google, Yahoo, GoodSearch, which generates some money for Altrusa International or your

local club, or any other search engine, the amount of information available is astounding. Even if you find the information useful, we encourage to do some research on your own. You might find just the right situation that you need to resolve a particular issue. The source for this article is hudo.com and the author of the following list is Alexander Kjerulf.

Things we normally do about complainers and why they don’t work:

1. Cheering them up - As in “Oh, it can’t be that bad”, “Come on, cheer up!” or the perennial favorite: “Time heals all wounds”. Saying things like this shows the complainer that you’re not taking their pain seriously. When you tell a complainer “it’s not that bad”, he will often complain even harder to convince you (and himself) that his problems are very serious indeed.
2. Suggesting solutions - “Why don’t you...”, “have you tried...” or even worse “You should really have...” The complainers’ problems are really serious and can’t be solved by a few suggestions from you. Or so they’ve convinced themselves. The more you try to suggest solutions, the harder they will work to convince you and themselves that these solutions could never possibly work for them.
3. Telling them to pull themselves together - “Quit complaining and do something about it” or one of my favorites: “You either want the problem or you want the solution”. Yeah, telling them that their problems are trivial and they just need to pull themselves together is going to work just fine. All complainers magically stop complaining at this. Or do they?
4. Complaining about the complainers - “Damn, that Sally complains a lot doesn’t she?” Guess what, you just became a complainer.
5. Ignoring them / avoiding them - This makes complainers clamor for attention even more - which usually makes people ignore them even more. That’s a vicious cycle right there.
6. Complaining along with them - “You know what, you’re right, the boss IS a jerk. And the

weather sucks. In fact everything sucks.” This can be kind of cozy because it creates bonding and an “us-against-the-world” feeling. But ultimately it’s a bad idea because the more people complain the less prone they are to doing something about their problems.

7. Confronting them - You can drive the complaints underground where you don’t see them, but they will probably still be going on. And repressed complaining is worse than open complaining because it gets to stew and grow while it’s hidden.

A trick that does work:

After listening to the complaint say, with deep sympathy in your voice, “You know, that sounds terrible. I don’t know how you deal with all of these problems.”

This approach works because it gives the complainer what he’s really after: Empathy. Not cheering up, not solutions, not egging-on. Just understanding of what is, for him, a difficult situation.

There are two important things to notice here:

1. Don’t be sarcastic when you say it. Be sincere.
2. You don’t have to agree that these are huge problems. Even if everything the complainer says sounds trivial to you, remember that it feels like a huge problem to him or her wouldn’t go on about it. What seems trivial to one person can be a huge problem for others.

So you’re not saying “Yes, I agree that’s a huge problem”. And you’re certainly not saying “Oh, poor poor you” in a sarcastic voice. You’re just acknowledging the fact that this is a huge problem for that person. Which undeniably it is.

Does this make the complaining go away? Only sometimes. But it keeps you from being part of a vicious cycle of responses that just makes the complainers complain more and more and more. The cycle is cut at the point you take their distress seriously.

So try this approach on your favorite complainer and tell us how it goes.