

Good Grievances

While it's easier to revel in the praise, listening and responding to employee gripes show your mettle as a manager.

By Noelle C. Nelson

One way to gauge how much a manager truly values his employees is how he handles their complaints and grievances. Too often, gripes are swept under the rug or the vocal, disgruntled employee is somehow blamed for a justifiable complaint.

Although some employees are hard to please, complaints usually reach a fever pitch because those unhappy employees have not been able to get their concerns heard by management. Employees need to express what's troubling them on the job—or that negativity will express itself in other ways, such as lower productivity and bad morale.

Unfortunately, employee grievances often receive little more than lip service and might even be held against the employee who does the complaining. When that happens, employees stop complaining (at least to management) and either stick it out and remain miserable on the job—and to others around them—or seek employment elsewhere. Therefore, it's critical to give employees opportunities to express concerns and grievances safely and without fear of reprisals.

Listen to Employee Grievances

Listening openly to employee grievances is easier said than done. No one likes to listen to complaints. While managers may like to believe that work issues can be addressed without dealing with an employee's feelings, that's not the case. It only causes the employee to feel more upset. Take, for example, the following scenario:

The employee comes in upset and states: "I've had it! Everyone is bombarding me with work to the point where there's no way I can finish the work or make people happy. It's driving me crazy. Can you tell people I'm overloaded and they can't expect me to get their job finished right away?"

The manager says: "Relax. I'll deal with it when I get a minute."

Employee (more upset): "Relax? There's no way I can get all this done. I bet I have 10 e-mails waiting for me by the time I walk back to my desk—all from people demanding things from me."

Manager (interrupting): "Like I told you, I'll take care of it." >



ILLUSTRATION BY ADAM NIKLEWICZ

Employee (continuing, intense): "I hope so, because if they keep pushing me ..."

Manager (cutting off employee): "That's enough."

Employee (frustrated): "You don't have to yell at me, too!"

Neither employee nor manager is happy with the way this conversation went. The employee feels his boss was only listening half-heartedly and odds are nothing will change. The manager is upset because he had to listen to an unhappy employee who was unwilling to accept his pat answers and leave.

Telling a frustrated person to relax will rarely cause that person to calm down. Instead, use appreciation. Begin by accepting the employee's frustrations and valuing him or her. This makes a positive discussion doable. The conversation would then follow along these lines:

The employee comes in upset and states: "I've had it! Everyone is bombarding me with work to the point where there's no way I can finish the work or make people happy. It's driving me crazy. Can you tell people I'm overloaded and they can't expect me to get their job finished right away?"

The manager says: "It can be very frustrating."

Employee (a little less exasperated): "I'll say! I don't know how much more I can take."

Manager (agreeing): "Work shouldn't make you crazy. Let me see how I can help, and I'll let you know what I can do."

Employee (sighs): "Okay. That would be a big help. Thanks."

Manager: "You're welcome. Thanks for letting me know about this."

The interaction was a positive experience for both. The employee feels someone is finally listening. The manager was able to calm the employee and promise a plan for action. The manager's and the employee's expectations are in sync.

The manager did not attempt to side with the employee, speak badly of oth-

er employees or moan about the work environment. The manager simply acknowledged the employee's emotions. The employee immediately appreciated the acknowledgment and believed the manager was sincere in his promise to look into the situation. Of course, the manager must follow through on that promise.

An open-door policy where employees can speak freely with different members of management is another way grievances can be addressed. Although begun with the best intentions, many times employees will voice concerns, management will listen, but nothing is ever done to address the issue.

Employees eventually see open-door policies, suggestion boxes, etc., as management's phony attempts at caring for its employees. Management then wonders why employees stop offering suggestions or voicing concerns.

These lines of communication have to be sincere. Employees will believe that management genuinely values them if it will hear and act on employee grievances. Of course, employees will not always have their way, but they can at least know management is listening and attempting to find a solution.

Nonverbal Valuing Techniques

A person's sense of being listened to relies heavily on the verbal and nonverbal cues of others. If you never nod your head or say "uh-huh" periodically while your employee is speaking, no matter how carefully you are listening, the employee may think you haven't heard a word.

Reassure your employee that you are listening and interested by saying "uh-huh" or "I see" or nodding your head occasionally, especially after the employee has made a specific point.

Focusing your attention directly on your employees while they are expressing their grievances conveys respect and consideration. Do not take phone calls or allow other interruptions to distract you. Even if you think the interruption

will last less than a minute, to employees that minute represents a shift in your focus and makes them wonder about their true importance to you.

Failing to listen attentively also can cause you to make errors in the way you handle a situation. Resist the temptation to jump in with judgments and evaluations.

Staying fully focused on your employee can be difficult. After all, managers have many concerns and the employee currently sitting in front of them is only one. Use the "back-pocket technique" to help you stay focused.

As you sit with your employee, whenever you have a distracting thought—something that does not concern the matter at hand—back pocket it. Mentally take the thought and put it in your back pocket, knowing you can retrieve it later at an appropriate time.

Once you've finished the interaction with your employee, take a moment to retrieve your back-pocket thoughts. Immediately jot them down on a piece of paper so you remember to deal with them later.

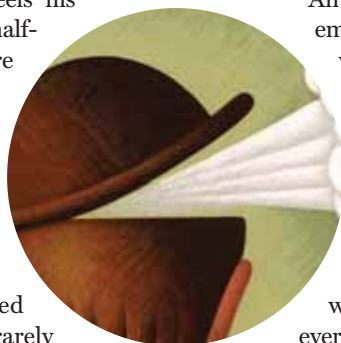
When you focus your listening exclusively on your employee, the employee senses your interest. Just as important, you will hear more of what you need to hear to be most effective. Important information is contained in a person's tone of voice and inflection that you may miss if you are not completely focused on listening to your employee.

The Chronic Complainer

Some employees are simply chronic complainers. This type of person is often difficult for managers to handle. Negative employees, without being overtly angry, seem to have a major chip on their shoulder, which makes working with them particularly challenging.

In this case, managers must find a way to value themselves and maintain their own sense of self-worth even as they work appropriately with the employee's negative mind-set. Helpful guidelines in working with such employees are:

- **Don't take it personally.** When a person has a negative mind-set virtually all of the time, that negativity has nothing to do with you. Negativity is simply



the filter through which that person chooses to experience the world.

- **Stay focused on the problem.** Acknowledge the employee's complaining in a neutral, calm way at the beginning of an interaction and then quickly shift focus to the business at hand.

- **Maintain a businesslike demeanor.** Don't make jokes or try to get the person to lighten up. It isn't the manager's job to make the person cheerful. Respecting a negative mindset, in which such individuals feel totally justified, is what will earn their (grudging) trust and cooperation.

The operative word is "respect." The employee's negative attitude is to be respected but not accepted. Here's an example of how to do that:

Employee (complaining, as usual): "Having to come all the way out here just to attend this training is a real nuisance. I know all this stuff already anyway. Plus the traffic is awful, I couldn't find anywhere decent to park, and I

had to walk almost a mile. I guess now you want me to fill out another bunch of forms."

Manager (serious concern, nodding): "Well, traffic sure can be difficult. It doesn't make our parking situation any easier, that's for sure. Please sign the forms here once you've looked them over."

Notice the manager did not just swallow the employee's grouching wholesale. He simply reflected, in a generic sense, what is true for all of us—traffic is often difficult, and parking can be problematic. He then zeroed in on the task without attempting to make the employee feel better, which probably wouldn't work anyway and certainly wasn't germane to the situation.

Dealing with negative employees in a respectful yet businesslike manner can often defuse their complaining. They will feel at least heard, and thus valued to some extent, making for a less grievance-ridden situation.

Part of the Job

Every manager is on the listening side of employee complaints—it comes with the job. While managers can implement changes that will reduce the number of grievances, complaints will never go away entirely. Perceptive managers will see grievances not as negatives, but as a means to improve employee relations, morale and company loyalty. ■

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