

LeaderPerfect Newsletter

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Complaints Are Our Friends

by Dr. Mike Armour

The last time I checked, few of us are thrilled when people complain about us. We would just as soon not hear it. We become expert, then, at avoiding situations where someone might voice a complaint. And we would never think of inviting complaints!! That's why you may see an occasional "suggestion box" along a corporate hallway, but rarely a "complaint box."

But I've been rethinking complaints lately. Especially in the realm of customer and employee relations. Customers have a way of "seething quietly" when they become upset. We don't realize they are unhappy until we lose them to a competitor. We never had a chance to fix their problem because we never even knew it existed.

The same thing happens with employees. Or with volunteers in non-profits. We have no inkling that they are feeling discontent until they walk out the door.

So how can we find out sooner, more quickly that a customer is upset? Or a client? Or an employee? One way is to make it easier for them to complain. Instead of going out of our way to avoid complaints, what if we went out of our way to uncover them?

An Early Warning System

When I was a naval intelligence officer, I would occasionally visit the innermost ring of the Pentagon. There we had a team called I & W – Indications and Warnings. They were monitoring activities around the globe, looking for early tell-tale signs of gathering danger. The goal was to act while the impending crisis was still manageable.

Lately I've been thinking of complaints as having a function much like that I & W shop. Complaints give us timely warnings of danger afoot. They alert us to discontent that we are unlikely to discover any other way. And the earlier we become aware of the complaint, the greater our chance to remedy the underlying problem.

So let me suggest a three-part action plan. First, start thinking of complaints as your friend. Not all complaints, necessarily. After all, some people are simply chronic complainers. They seem determined to find something to complain about, no matter what you do.

But most people are cut from a different piece of cloth. They don't typically complain just to complain. Their complaints come from genuine discontent and deserve a thoughtful hearing.

Which brings me to the second part of the action plan. We must learn to set aside our defensiveness when someone complains. Concerned with protecting our ego, we tend to treat complaints either defensively or dismissively. Or both. Rather than truly listening carefully to the complaint, we begin almost immediately to formulate our response. And it's usually a response aimed at labeling the complaint as unfounded, ill-informed, or otherwise less than legitimate.

But when our attention is fixed on defending ourselves or explaining away the complaint, we're not truly listening. And by not listening we are probably missing elements of truth that often are present even in otherwise unfounded complaints.

Moreover, complaints reveal the other party's perceptions. And for all of us, perception is reality. Dismissing a complaint does nothing to change the perception behind it. Thus, for the complaining party the problem is still real. Nor have we done nothing to address the underlying upset.

Creating Opportunities for Complaints

The third element of our action plan is to make it easy for people to complain. If you're going to use complaints as an early warning system, then you need steady input to the system. Don't be bashful about giving people opportunities to complain.

One of my clients, a mortgage banking company, recently incorporated a series of "customer touches" into their loan processing. At critical stages of the process the customer receives an email with timely updates on the progress of the loan, what will happen next, and any adjustments on timelines. Included in these touches are invitations for customers to complain. Rather than waiting until the loan has funded to ask for a customer evaluation, feedback is sought regularly throughout the process. "Are we meeting your expectations? Are we giving you sufficient information? Is there something we've overlooked that would be helpful to you?"

The key here is not getting a response from every customer. Many, if not most, will not take time to offer detailed feedback. But the purpose is to give the customer a user-friendly invitation to sound an alert that dissatisfaction is setting in. It's far easier to correct a problem in the course of the process than to regain a customer whose disillusionment takes them in search of another company.

In terms of employee relations, it's helpful to ask occasionally, "If you could fix one thing around here, what would it be?" Notice that I've not asked the gentler question, "How could we make things better?" That question may give you helpful feedback. But it's not as likely to be detailed as the response you get when you ask what needs to be fixed. Anything that needs "fixing" is a problem. And it's problems – not missed opportunities for improvement – that cost us customers, clients, and employees.

A Final Thought

When you were a child, do you remember adults trying to help you understand which people you should trust and which ones you should avoid? They would tell you, "The fireman is our friend." Or, "The policeman is our friend." As leaders we need to also learn that complaints are our friend.

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