

How to deal with a whiner

A sympathetic ear can pay dividends in the end

Question:

I work with a colleague whose response to every request is, "I can't do that," or "Do you know how difficult it is to do?" We usually come to some agreement over time, but it's exhausting. He's the "go-to" guy, so there's no chance of going above his head. Are there any strategies to speed up the process?

Response:

It sounds to me as if you are dealing with a complainer. Someone who doesn't handle changes well and can't look past his or her own needs. What a complainer needs is someone who will listen and understand how difficult it is for them to do things different than the way they planned.

On the surface, it appears he doesn't want to budge from his position. But past experiences tell you that over time he can shift gears and move in a different direction.

What a complainer is looking for is your help. They need an empathetic ear and someone who can help them find a viable solution. When complainers find themselves moving outside of the world they know and understand, they become overwhelmed and often emotionally shut down. It's not that they don't want to help you; it's that your request triggers an intense feeling of inadequacy. They feel inept and vulnerable which sparks the defensive "push back" experience you describe. From their perspective, they feel as if they are the ones who have to make all of the concessions.

Since it takes time for a complainer to

process change, it's mutually advantageous if you take on the role as facilitator to help him get past his mental paralysis. Benjamin Franklin once said, "Men are best convinced by reasons that they themselves discover." By assuming the role as facilitator, you help him work through his negative emotions so he can uncover his own solutions.

The best strategy for helping someone think through a problem is to ask questions. So when he says, "I can't do that!" you want to respond with, "Because?" And when he says, "Do you know how difficult it is to...?" respond with, "No, I don't. Help me understand the challenges you face when...?" Then listen. Really listen. He's going to vent, and as painful as it is for you to have to hear it all, it's a pivotal step in the process.

Imagine that his emotions are a pendulum swinging back and forth. The venting is the negative side of the swing. Once you've hit the peak, you swing toward the positive direction where the problem-solving strategy can take place.

The key to getting the pendulum moving in the positive direction will be for you to have emotional discipline and ask thought-provoking questions. When he's venting, it is extremely tempting to say to him, "Look buddy, this is your job. Just do it and stop wasting my time." But that approach will only result in you ending up at a dead end street.

You need to put your emotions in-check and listen. It's an important step when dealing with a complainer. Nod, make eye contact and take notes, if appropriate, to let him know you are really listening. It's appropriate to respond with an occasional, "I see" or "That's understandable" or "I didn't know that." These gestures help reduce his anxiety and give him the feeling you understand the strain he's under.

Listen for clues to help you craft non-

invasive problem-solving questions that help him think through possible solutions. Using questions along the lines of, "Have you considered (or ever tried)...?" or "What happens when you..." will redirect his attention toward identifying a possible solution.

Be mindful of the tone of your voice when asking your questions. You do not want to come across as an interrogator, as this will only cause him to emotionally shut down. Rather, you want the tone of your voice to be curious. This may be difficult as your patience is probably wearing thin from listening to all of his griping.

If find this to be the case, take a short break; use the restroom, get a snack or take a short walk and reconvene in 5 to 15 minutes. At this point, you're on the home stretch and you don't want to compromise the effort you've put in thus far.

Your objective is to help him get past the mental impasse and help him identify possible solutions. Once he has pinpointed an acceptable solution, your work is done.

During this process, you might want to offer a few small concessions as a sign of goodwill. He might decline, saying, "No that will not be necessary" or, "That won't make a difference," but it will demonstrate to him your willingness to give up something to make it work.

Dealing with a complainer is tiring. However, you might find that over time, he may become conditioned to your approach and surprise you one day by saying, "I don't have an answer for you now, but talk to me at the end of the day, and I'll have some options for you." Your investment strategy is now paying dividends.



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