

Thanks for Complaining

APPRECIATING FEEDBACK AS AN OPPORTUNITY FOR GROWTH

By Jill Bella

Years ago I found myself frustrated by the griping I was hearing from teaching staff. Complaints like “The 4-year-old class gets all the new art materials,” “We have no input into who gets hired,” “The afternoon teachers don’t clean the tables after snack,” “The computer is too slow,” “Parents just don’t care,” and many others were a common part of their repertoire. These comments seemed harsh and hearing staff complain took its toll on me. My initial reaction was to be defensive—to stop the complaints as quickly as possible. In some cases I was successful, but more often than not the complaints just kept coming. And then one day I had an epiphany.

Wanting to eliminate complaints was based on my assumption that complaining was a bad thing. When I shifted my mindset recognizing that complaints provided valuable information about the program, how I handled complaints changed completely. I became less defensive and began taking time to explore the reason behind the complaints. I realized those seemingly harsh statements were important for several reasons:

Complaints indicate a discrepancy between the real and ideal. When teachers complain they do so because the current work climate does not represent what they want it to be. If staff aren’t complaining it might mean things are good, but it might also mean they have given up on the idea that things can improve. As you work toward creating norms of continuous quality improvement, this distinction is critical. Complaints provide direction for exploring what is not working and what can be done differently.

Complaints offer insight into the quality of work life. Quality of work life is reflected in a person’s level of job satisfaction and fulfillment. When working conditions create disappointment or frustration, job satisfaction will be impacted. Whitebook, Howes, and Phillips state, “By failing to meet the needs of adults who work in child care, we are threatening not only their well-being, but that of the children in their care.” If teachers complain about the layout of space, the lack of adult-size chairs, and equipment that needs repair, it clearly impacts their ability to support children’s learning and development. They are less likely to be engaged fully in interactions when they are distracted, uncomfortable, and their needs are not being met. Recognizing the connection between complaints and quality of work life is essential for ensuring the entire center is functioning to the best of its ability.

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Complaints reflect level of commitment. Vocalizing dissatisfaction about center practices can indicate that teachers are invested in their work that they want to see change. As Robert Kegan states, “People wouldn’t complain about anything unless they cared about something. Underneath the surface torrent of complaints and cynical humor and eye-rolling, there is a hidden river of passion and commitment which is the reason the complaints even exist.” Remember that when someone takes the time and effort to complain, they often do so because they are committed to where they work and want to see things get better.

Complaints provide perspective. When you are surprised by a complaint, it is often because you don’t share the same perspective on the issue. Complaints allow us to see that people have different points of view about organizational practices. From where we stand, things may seem to be running smoothly, but to someone else the situation may be quite different. Listening thoughtfully to teachers’ complaints can lead to better efficiency, effectiveness, and overall performance.

The next time you hear a complaint, think of it as an invitation to solve a problem, expand your perspective about differing points of view, and strengthen teachers’ commitment to the program. To use an example from above, when a teacher complains that a co-worker doesn’t clean up after snack that may be an indication that there are differing priorities about cleanliness, that there are scheduling and time issues, or that role responsibilities are not clearly delineated. The complaint is the invitation to solve the issue.

PRINTABLE RESOURCE: QUESTIONS TO ASK YOURSELF WHEN YOU RECEIVE A COMPLAINT

There are often multiple reasons prompting a complaint. Your job is to understand the context of the particular complaint and how it relates to your larger goal of creating a work environment where staff are empowered to identify areas where program practices can be strengthened. Once you embrace complaints as a source of valuable information about your program, constructive feedback will become a norm at your center and complaints will be stated more tactfully and professionally.

If you are interested in learning more about the value of complaints and strategies for improving your center’s organizational climate, check out the following books:

- [A Complaint is a Gift](#) by Janelle Barlow and Claus Moller
- [A Great Place to Work: Creating a Healthy Organizational Climate](#) by Paula Jorde Bloom, Ann Hentschel, and Jill Bella
- [Thanks for the Feedback](#) by Douglas Stone and Sheila Heen

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