

How to Voice a Complaint

“Complaint has a noble history. It has driven human society forward and led to the abolition of systemic injustice. That it is now primarily associated with inconsequential moans and frivolous litigation is a travesty.” ~ Julian Baggini, *Complaint: From Minor Moans to Principled Protests*, Profile Books, 2010

Imagine this: You have a great idea that would change the way you work. In fact, you totally disagree with the systems or processes everyone’s been using. You have a legitimate complaint that needs to be heard by your supervisor, leadership team and/or coworkers.

But how do you voice dissent without being perceived as negative—or worse, a whiner?

“Dissent plays an important role in the workplace,” writes Johny T. Garner, a Texas Christian University communications professor, in a recent *Harvard Business Review* blog post (“How to Communicate Dissent at Work,” February 4, 2013).

“For any organization to thrive, employees need to be able to propose solutions to problems, raise questions about unethical practices and ask how they can work more efficiently and effectively.”

Employees report greater job satisfaction in workplaces where dissenting opinions are accepted and even encouraged. Leaders should strive to create an open culture where people can consider a wider range of proposals and options before making decisions.

The Danger of Dissent

That said, there’s a big problem with dissent: A lot of people don’t want to hear it. Many employees worry that expressing dissent will cause their bosses and coworkers to see them negatively, or fear their input won’t make a difference anyway.

A Message from Nancy...

I have a couple of questions to ask you:

1. Is your business as successful as you think it should be?
2. Are you and your team able to pinpoint the solutions necessary to create positive changes to get where you need to go?



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No one wants to hear scathing diatribes and grievances, so proceed carefully when sharing your opinion. There are no magic words that will convince people to listen to you, but Professor Garner offers four suggestions that are consistently associated with positive results:

1. Choose Your Audience. Determine who should be on the receiving end of your dissent. To effect real change, you'll need to express your ideas to someone who has the power to remedy the problem.

The boss: Many employees automatically turn to their supervisors, but he or she may not have the power to address all problems. Similarly, supervisors may not be willing to ferry complaints up the chain of command.

Of course, you may have other goals when expressing dissent. If you just want to get something off your chest, telling your supervisor may provide some peace of mind, regardless of the eventual outcome. It also shows that you care about key issues.

Coworkers: If you're looking for someone who understands your frustration, your coworkers make the best audience. Though it's rare that lateral dissent results in change, it helps build a coalition around your position. It also helps prepare you for subsequent conversations with a supervisor. But be careful how you voice your concerns among coworkers; you don't want to be labeled a malcontent or troublemaker.

2. Choose Your Words. Regardless of whether you're looking for change or understanding, package your dissent with a solution instead of merely spotlighting a problem. Proposing fixes makes it more difficult for people to dismiss you as a petty grumbler, and it helps move the organization in the right direction.

While negativity is usually frowned upon, most people are open to new ideas and improved outcomes. Your boss and coworkers may even jump at the chance to help you refine your ideas.

Always emphasize the solution when describing a problem. If you fail to present it clearly and forcefully, it may go unnoticed, making it easier for your audience to brush off your dissent. Presentation strategies that emphasize positive opportunities over negative realities always help you plead your case.

3. Choose Your Tone of Voice and Emotions. Dissent usually arises from an emotional place. Most of us don't complain unless we feel strongly about an issue. Nonetheless, emotional venting—however honest or well-intentioned—is rarely the best way to share your thoughts.

Supervisors and coworkers are more likely to lend you their ears when you communicate in a calm, rational manner. Use direct, factual appeals to bolster your position. Include supporting information that demonstrates critical thinking to stay within the bounds of rational behavior.

Sometimes, however, adding a touch of emotion to your presentation may work in your favor—particularly if you reference the values under which your organization operates. Few people will challenge these organizational aims, thus making your dissent more persuasive.

4. Choose Calm. While it may be tempting to employ threats, aggressive demands or ultimatums, these approaches usually backfire and are considered inappropriate in a professional environment. Remember: Every employee is replaceable.

Even if pressure tactics prove successful, your relationships will suffer, hampering your future. And if you're the one who backs down from a standoff, you'll lose credibility.

When to Voice Dissent?

Dissent can be risky because some people feel threatened when an employee questions a policy or practice. But never accept something because "it's the way we've always done it" or your manager says it's the only way.

There's a threshold where you need to say something and speak up. This juncture will be different for everyone, based on personality, relationships and organizational climate.

Think critically about your workplace experiences. Has someone or something crossed this threshold? If so, use the tips presented here to speak up constructively.

