

COMPLAINING (QUEJAS)

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CONFLICT TRANSFORMATION

I often read Michael Kinsman's column in our local newspaper business section. Recently I was easily able to get myself scornful and dismissive as I read his report of organizational psychologist Bruce Katcher's:

7 complaints of employees are universal

Bruce Katcher sees no mystery in the complaints of American workers. He's identified seven major complaints and says they seem to be universal.

If this industrial and organizational psychologist can put his finger on employee dissatisfaction so easily, why can't corporate leaders?

"Either they don't hear their workers' complaints, or they are too consumed with other matters to do anything about them," says Katcher, president of The Discovery Group, a consulting group in Sharon, Mass.

Katcher believes that corporate leaders are more reactive than proactive when it comes to employee relations issues, and that means they allow workplace frustrations to fester.

You might have heard in your own workplace what Katcher calls the seven major complaints of workers:

- There's no job security here.
- I don't trust management.
- There's too much work to do.
- The pay is too low.
- Communication is poor.
- I don't have enough balance in my life.
- I feel under appreciated.

Katcher thinks companies would be better off if they [corporate leaders] addressed these frustrations in a meaningful way. He fears, though, that they are out of touch with the realities others face in the workplace.

"It's hard to believe, but when you get to the top of senior management, you are different," he says. "It's a phenomenon that occurs in nearly all companies. It may be because the information you get at the top is filtered or it may come from the bias of being on top."

From: AT WORK by Michael Kinsman *San Diego Union-Tribune*, November 21, 2001 (full text at end)

"Hello!" [my practiced sarcastic tone] "Get a Grip!" [my encouraging put-down] -- I could react in my best moral outrage (and disappointment). Such reactions can be fun for me, especially since I can so easily see how Katcher's perspective starts off on the wrong foot! "Most of these complaints -- of course the magic number seven, count 'em -- throw blame at the other guy."

After my justified thrill subsides, I back off my complaining about complaints. I return to Katcher's list, and my reaction to it, to find if I can newly understand acts of complaining.

turmoil of complaint

I begin by producing my own list of the seven same issues, a list closer to how I envision a complainer could energize his or her responsibility for the issues.

- I feel insecure that I can keep a job at this company,
- I am frightened in my belief that my managers are not looking out for my interests,
- I have accepted more work than I can accomplish,
- I want more compensation for the work I do,
- I'm not satisfied in my communications with others in this firm,
- I don't have enough balance in my life,
- I want from others here more appreciation for my efforts than I receive.

I think my list is clearly a psychological approach (perhaps even a person-centered approach) in that the complaining individual takes on or owns her or his situation in order to deal with it. Katcher's list seems to offer a sociological approach, perhaps suggesting that prudent management could change the practices within the organization (or even that the structure of organizational life should be significantly changed). My moral outrage now chastened by some clarity, I no longer harbor a wish to dismiss the other guy's approach. At this point I leave as an open question how people best bring about change to their situations.

Still, I am pursuing complaints as a key ingredient for change. And of complaints already we have plenty: the two lists-of-seven encompassing complaints about bosses and complaints about self; in addition, the example of my own act of complaint about Katcher's list.

COMPLAINT (COM = with) (PLAINT = strike): A blow against the self (lamenting) and/or a blow against an other person or situation (lodging a complaint).

Complaints are "strikes" or "blows" against blockages: I the complainer am facing a loss of direction, I have difficulty being-here in my negative situation, I am reluctant to move ahead.

Complainers are stating or proposing that "this is the reality." These statements are affirmations for the complainers themselves and/or attempts to receive a confirmation of their blockage from fellow travelers. And, like all human communications, complaints are bids for attention.

When I (or we) am attending fully to any matter at hand, I am, in Martin Buber's words, "...wholly in a musical floating relationship." I am not in need of affirmations or confirmations about the reality in which I participate. While such undivided attention is not rare, my attention often does break. My participation in living splits apart as I become conscious of my attending. I may experience epistemological distress - "What among the different claimants to reality deserves my

attending?" "How do I refocus, redirect, or reenter that 'musical floating relationship'?"

Complaints are bids for attention to a perceived distressing loss of directionality, a loss of full presence in forward flow. As Buber might phrase it, my forwarding presence toward the world has lost my "inborn direction for going out to meet the other." When complaining, I am in conflict and I am wounded. I am experiencing disunity and I am thrown into my conditioned reactions, striking at the very unity that I have lost.

Carl Rogers developed a practice aimed at healing just such splits-in-living that we experience. He responded to a bid for attention with his own full attention. In the service of becoming fully present, Rogers developed a restricted range - those kinds of attention most likely to be helpful and received by a person who is making her bid for attention. Not incidentally, Rogers' ways of attending applied by oneself to splits in one's own self also seem to bring healing.

Rogers' practices are a highly skilled, disciplined form of what I call "kindness attention" -- affection, appreciation, interest, humor, trust, and gratitude. On the other hand surely, full presence in mutually attentive relationships often occurs between people striking at each other. But complainers feel an uncomfortable resolution of kindness and conflict; they further lose direction by trying to deliver blows to an other while clinging to a disappearing sense of their own benevolent self. They seek support for staying in the split. Striking furtively towards the person, situation, or part of self that seems to oppose their presence, complainers do not allow themselves full engagement.

Sociologists, psychologists, and theologians frequently call attention to humankind's distress as a result of our various kinds of splitting. They point to alienation from one's social environment, or a divided self, or distance from God as primary human dilemmas. But even as we're held back and split, our complaining shows we sense a promise or a prophecy that re-union is possible. Attention needs be paid to that union in whatever sphere I know it: "self," "spirit," "our mutual relationship," or "the company."

Can the recipient of my complaints - whether it's my boss or my self or my God - respond with attentive kindness to my striking bid for attention? While he is under my blows must he defend himself or dismiss me, or is he able to be in kindness attention? Can his kindness facilitate my being-present?

To summarize thus far, I have suggested that a complainer is blocked in her forward movement. She is unable to travel two apparently opposing assumptions, a path of delight and a path of separation. Her self, her world is not whole. She precipitates a conflict between one assumption and the other. She strikes a blow for attention.

I have further suggested that, following Rogers, some form of kindness attention to the conflict dilemma will give her world its best chance to come again into full presence.

range of dilemmas hidden in complaints

Some forty years ago Abraham Kaplan chuckled that we might be happier if we saw the dilemmas of our world as being of two kinds. The first

kind he called "problems," the second, "predicaments." We can approach problems by "solving." He ruefully thought we'd probably better off "coping with" predicaments.

Some years previously, Gabriel Marcel had also distinguished two types of dilemmas. Like Kaplan, his first type is "problem," to which solutions could be applied. His second type, however, he calls "mystery." Marcel wishes to approach dilemmas of mystery by accepting the promises they bear.

Kaplan and Marcel are not addressing the exact same issues. But each in his context is proposing an alternative to what they see as our usual modern approach, which is assuming dilemmas are problems-to-be-solved.

Problems are dilemmas which seem (to someone) to need a solution and be amenable to solution. Most problems offer "more than one way to skin the cat." Earlier, we saw Bruce Katcher's list of the infamous seven complaints and something of the solutions he proposed. I complained about his list and his solutions. My reframing (or is it reengineering?) of his list -- changing the context or locus of the problem to change its meaning -- led to new cat-skinning solutions in terms of personal responsibility. Both Katcher and I treated our lists of complaints as if new (enlightened) information understood and acted upon (by someone) would serve to end the dilemma.

In my experience, people in work cultures are sensitive to dilemmas and pretty quickly pick them up pragmatically as problems needing solution. But if I take Kaplan and Marcel's advisories to heart, I will tread softly in stalking this cat. What if these blows for attention were for the complainers not actually dilemmas-to-be-solved, that is, problems, but predicaments or mysteries? Perhaps the executives Katcher cites are not ignoring their workers' complaints, but facing a series of dilemmas they are in no position to solve.

A senior colleague of ours, Richard Farson has followed up on Kaplan's distinction and cultivated for himself an ability to separate out predicaments from problems. He calls this ability a "sense for the absurd."

In Farson's view, much of the life we create in the context of organizations producing work is lulled by conventional wisdom. Our attempts are to make life easier, non-threatening, and invulnerable to significant change, and these attempts result in insoluble predicaments. The dilemmas turn into form-shifters -- interpersonal cats with nine lives -- returning to yowl, scratch, and complain in new skins.

To deal with predicaments Farson counsels first to allow the enormity of the situation to wash over and engulf us. Then, still uncomprehending, embrace our predicament and renounce success. Finally, in great respect for the life in the dilemma's claws, approach it anyway; disciplined, willful, creative, and playful.

I like the sense of openness and a joyful ongoing foolishness I feel in Farson's recommendations for coping with organizational dilemmas. I am attracted to his freedom from the necessity of success. Success is, of course, a feature that a problem-to-solve approach deems essential.

Marcel's feeling for mystery offers another, even wider understanding what a complaint might be about. In distinction to Farson's approaching through absurdity, Marcel connects to a dilemma through its promise. Marcel believes dilemmas define human life. Yet for him, our existence

is primarily somehow mysteriously in harmony, "completely unprotected from us, at our mercy yet invulnerable and sacred." We get glimpses, a calling, or a touch promising the harmonious unity we seek but never fulfilling it. Accepting this promise is setting our own life course as a test of our forever ambiguous relation to the promise.

As a way of responding to complaints, Farson's ideas about enduring predicaments, as well as Katcher's and mine about problem-solving, each is a device for people to locate and choose to plant their feet on their place of responsibility. All are attempts to regain wholeness and step into movement through acts of what I'll term "grounding." But Farson also resembles Marcel in releasing us from definable results and dilemma closure. Marcel asks us to reach out to adopt that stray cat. He senses our lives can move forward by our permitting them to fall into wholeness through a process that I call "drowning."

A conflicted world may call for responses by solving, coping, or accepting. I see these three general approaches to reunion as conceptual points on a continuum from "grounding" to "drowning." For me the approaches are not diagnostic or treatment categories for attending to the conflict. At best they may be hints at how wide the range of our responsive attention can be and how the conflicted person may journey toward recovering full presence and direction.

attention to direction

The complainer's world is split and she is uncomfortably at war. She is lost in her direction, her way forward is halted, she is separated from unity-in-circumstance. Aware of her discomfort, she pursues her desire to change her lot by striking at the blockage she perceives.

And what does a complainer desire as he claims attention for the dilemma wrapped around him? A solution? A coping-with? An acceptance? How can he best move forward now, on his feet or swept up in the flow?

I believe my best attention is responding to the conflicted person rather than to the dilemma. The dilemma is defined by a person's response, it is but a first roadmap of the person. The complaint is a first telling how I may read the map. What is most important is the complainer's own direction.

An employee of a large manufacturing firm complains to me of the more and more frequent lay-offs occurring in his industry and his company. He tells me how he worries at night, lamenting his length of service, his limited range of skills, and his age, all of which, he says, could be held against him.

He talks, I listen. He talks, I listen. Then I talk. I say, "This is what I'd do in your place..." He listens, and then we laugh. He'd thought of that of course, many times. And we did not continue whatever direction he might have been developing.

Was he reconfirmed in his life's absurdity? Did he choose to stay in the dilemma? Did he want a whole new idea for a career move? Was he enlightened? Did he long to believe life offered him a promise?

I will not know. I offered him my short cut. My genuine, heart-felt head-thought short cut to happiness and prosperity. But in our fellowship he did not develop the kindness he required to reconcile the disturbing otherness between his assumptions of delight and of separation.

When I complain that things are not in their correct place I seek unity through making defensible boundaries. I need an awareness of a strong self or strong organization. I look for the responsible agent to set things right. I want a discipline to work systemizing what exists, and clarifying how to deal with existence by defining right and wrong action. I need conscious attention to my choices to withdraw or impose my conditions of worth onto my situation. Solving problems and coping with predicaments are competencies I will likely use. Aiming to regain my confidence and optimism I approach reunion through grounding.

There are times when I complain about my absence from the rest of a world that I hear singing. To heal my disunity I need to relax into an amative, erotic process in which the context overwhelms and sweeps the dilemma into irrelevance. Coping and accepting a sense of grace or faith are the skills or attitudes that allow my voice into the singing. Approaching this reunion means drowning in an unconditional offer of presence. I belong, all parts of me belong, you belong - Here are we! That which has parted meets again.

A complainer is stopped in fear. Some aspect of life as he lives it refuses unity and he is unable to proceed. His complaining calls attention to his estrangement from others. These others have become alien aspects of his self, his God, or people in his organization. He is calling to our attention his glimpse of paradise being lost. Where shall the reunion be? What kind of attention will best respond? How can he be released from his fear? What abilities have you or I within ourselves or with others to encourage grounding and allow drowning?

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(Full conclusion of Michael Kinsman's Column, AT WORK)

Management seen as uncaring

"That's why we think of management as being myopic or uncaring. That's why it seems like senior management doesn't have a clue. But you can flip-flop that and say the same thing about the people in the mail room or the clerical staff. It works both ways."

Katcher sees a clear communication issue in most companies and says middle managers - caught between senior management and workers - often are to blame. He says American business probably doesn't teach them the communication skills they need for such crucial jobs.

Yet, if Katcher possessed magical power to make one important difference as a chief executive he says he would concentrate on work-life balance. The lack of that, he says, has a draining effect on today's work force.

"The people who are happiest in our work force are those that work part-time or in off-hours" he says. "Independent contractors and self-employed also are happy."

Give people flexibility

"We see that having control over your work is important to most people. The key seems to be giving people flexibility. If they need an hour off to do something and the company gives them that flexibility, knowing that they will make it up later, that is showing people respect and dignity."

As much as he thinks that's essential, he says communication is the crucial link that provides senior management with an understanding of work force needs.

"In the companies that operate best we see that senior management has good communication with the people doing the work. We need to look at employees as assets, not liabilities. We need to realize that it's not the machines that do the work but that the people are the machines. People are the revenue producers"

There are built-in corporate blinders, however. Katcher says that the major obstacle is the different perspective top executives have from the people they supervise. "One of the perks of senior management is that they have this power to work from home if they want or to come in late," Katcher says. "For some reason they don't appreciate how much that means to them and how much it would mean to other workers."

There is a way around this, and that is for senior management to acknowledge the built-in blinders of the job and try to take them off. We all stand to benefit.