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Dear Reader,

Do you consider yourself a complainer? Do you notice when other people complain? How do you react? Have you ever observed the tense atmosphere that is created when people complain? Tense and dense? So what are complaints? Why do we use them so much? What purpose do they serve? Can we live without them?

Enjoy the exploration into the complex dynamics of complaining!

(We also hope you like our new layout!)

Isabel Rimanoczy
Editor

Quote of the Month

"I hate it when people complain!"

Uncle Wilbur



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ABOUT COMPLAINING

by Isabel Rimanoczy

A few days ago I was listening to a very upset person. Carla (not her real name) started the conversation bursting out in rage. I only had to ask "How are you doing?" to launch a cathartic stream of complaints that were waiting to erupt, like a ruptured dam. "I am furious!" she exclaimed. "You cannot believe what my boss did again. This has become a pattern, and I have endured these behaviors of hers for too long now! She is so mean, so useless as a leader! I have been working on this project for two weeks, and she knows it, but at the conference call today she played the innocent in front of everyone, asking me dumb questions. She suggested that I should consider 'taking a look' at this project - and by so doing she diminished all the hard work I've

already done on the project! She made me look so unprofessional, all to show the others that she has power, and that she knows more than me. Can you believe this woman?"

She wasn't finished. "And you won't believe how much money this company has invested in leadership development training programs. Just look at the result! I don't know honestly why I continue here. I should send out my resume because this is not going to change. She is just useless, there is absolutely no point in talking to her; she denies everything, she doesn't have time to meet when I ask her, and I can imagine her saying "Oh no, I didn't mean to diminish your contribution! Not at all."

Later that day I was on the phone with a friend. She was sharing with me that her daughter was not being very proactive looking into a job opportunity that was given to her. "I don't understand why she hasn't sent in her resume", she muttered. "This is a great opportunity, and since they know me she most probably will be hired no matter what her skills are, and any job is better than none! What a lack of initiative! What is she waiting for? I just don't understand her."

What do these two snapshots have in common? They are both complaints. Complaints are a form of expressing our dissatisfaction and characterizing ourselves as victims of someone else's regrettable behavior. Complaints often carry a tone of helplessness and develop an atmosphere of discontent, bitterness and hopelessness. While a fact can be stated in a straightforward way, a complaint adds drama to it.

Example:

You arrived 30 minutes late to our meeting (FACT)

Why are you always late? You did it again; we were all waiting and waiting...! (Complaint)

Will Bowen, author of A Complaint Free World (www.acomplaintfreeworld.org)^[1] launched a campaign in 2006 to create awareness of our habit of complaining. He used a purple rubber bracelet that is distributed free with the instruction to change it to the other wrist each time we catch ourselves complaining. To this date over five million bracelets have been shipped to 80 countries, and the program is being adopted by adults and in schools. His goal is to create a complaint-free society, which means more positive and satisfactory relationships among people.

But why do we complain?

We all have reasons for dissatisfaction, and a complaint is not just an empty rhetorical habit, although it can seem so. There are always reasons for it - which doesn't mean that they justify the complaint nor that complaining is the best way to handle the situation. Let's see why.

#1. Know your own feelings.

The first step in understanding why we complain is to become aware of our feelings. In the opening snapshots both people are upset with someone else. But the anger is not being acknowledged as such - it is manifested in the choice of words, in the tone, in the passion with which both Carla and my friend were describing unfortunate events.

When we are caught in an emotion we "are" the anger, the sadness or the frustration. We cannot see it since we are completely immersed in it. We express it, we act it out. If I had asked them "How does this make you feel?" I would have heard replies like "angry, frustrated, sad," etc.

By taking a moment to explore how we are feeling we are able to name the emotion, and to own it, creating an immediate distance between ourselves and the feeling. We move from being an angry person to having feelings of anger. The focus of our attention immediately shifts too - from the other person we are blaming, to the feelings we acknowledge in ourselves.

#2. Why does this bother me?

The two snapshots have something else in common. They both emphasize a sense of disappointment; both speakers had some expectations that someone else did not meet. But if we remember that we all have reasons, the next step

is to ask ourselves why a particular event is bothering us. Behind Carla's complaint I could sense the pain of not being appreciated in her work, her embarrassment of losing face publicly, her helplessness to change the situation, and her loss of trust in the other person.

In the second snapshot, the disappointment is related to the behavior of the daughter. The mother's statement "I just don't understand her" implies disapproval rather than curiosity and a desire to understand her daughter's behavior. But why does this bother my friend? Does she perhaps feel overwhelmed by the financial responsibility, and therefore hopes her daughter can bring some money into the household? Does she feel obligated towards the potential employer, who knows her? Does she feel guilty that she might have brought up a young woman who lacks initiative? Who knows? But what is sure, is that she, like all of us, has her reasons.

By getting a glimpse into why a situation bothers us, we shift the focus of our attention away from the complaint. We are able to understand what we had at stake. The picture is already changing and how we are feeling about it is changing too.

#3. We all have reasons.

Now that we have discovered that we had several very personal reasons behind our emotion and complaints, we are ready to consider that we may not be the only ones having reasons. So what may be the reasons behind the other person's behavior? If the first answer that jumps to our mind is "selfishness, ambition, egoism, stupidity", let's take a second look. What feelings could be behind this behavior? What fears? We may only have our assumptions, but even these may go some way to broadening our perspective. The reality is that people seldom set out to incur anger from others; no one wants to be hated or scorned. What could be behind the responses of Carla's boss? What reasoning might lead to the reluctance of my friend's daughter to apply for that job? We may or not find the opportunity to ask, but it seems critical for us to at least acknowledging that we all have our own reasons for our judgments of others.

#4. How did I contribute to this?

Now that we have a more complex and broader picture of the situation, we are ready for our next question. How might I have contributed to this, myself? This is a nuanced and powerful question. It is useless to ask that question when we are immersed in our anger, because it would only threaten our already battered self-esteem. But a few yards down this road of reflection, it might happen that the timing is right. The question no longer sounds threatening: instead by discovering in what ways we may have contributed partly to the situation, we may go from feeling a helpless victim to actually having some power to influence our destiny.

Time to act

#5. So what can I do?

At this point there are several things we can do. We can explore the other person's reasons, checking our assumptions and trying to understand what fears, feelings and needs lie behind their behavior. We can also share with them how we were made to feel by the occurrence in question, not blaming the other for our feelings, but owning them. We can reflect on how to modify our contribution, or how to avoid it next time. And most useful, we can make a suggestion or a recommendation, which can provide the final touch in changing from complaining victim to proactive shaper.

And naturally, we can ponder what we are learning about ourselves. After all, every painful event is only there for one purpose: so we can learn something from it.

¹⁴Special thanks to Cyndee Krantz for introducing me to this program.

If you want more triggers for reflection, visit <http://isabelrimanoczy.blogspot.com>



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