

## Moving from Complaints to Collaboration

It's hard to collaborate with people who are always complaining. In fact, it's hard to collaborate with anyone anytime they — or we — are complaining.

Where do complaints happen in your organization? Maybe you dread going to certain meetings, or interacting with particular people because you know you'll hear one complaint after another. Maybe complaints are a pervasive feature of the culture of the organization, or a team. Or maybe complaints aren't a big problem in your organization except around one or two people, or a couple of chronic issues you can't seem to resolve, but boy are those tiresome.

### What happens when somebody starts complaining?

Think about what happens for you when somebody is complaining to you about something. What happens in your body? Notice. How open do you feel? How interested are you in helping?

Most of us experience complaints — whether they are other people's or our own — as a drag, literally: a burden we have to carry, a pulling our energy down.

**Complaining tends to shut us down**, whether we are doing it ourselves, or listening to someone else do it.

We want our interactions with our co-workers, bosses, volunteers, and the people we serve to feel collaborative, and to encourage good work that moves us toward our goals. We also want to feel heard, and to be effective, when we are trying to communicate a concern, a need, or our sense of a problem that needs solving.

*Complaints are intended to be that communication*, but we often respond to them by becoming *less* receptive and responsive, rather than more.

**Yet, a complaint is a placeholder for important information**; it is a flag that indicates someone's unease or discontent with a situation. Notice that I said it is a placeholder: it's not actually the important information itself. And indeed often, the complaint can actually get in the way of communicating what *is* important.

### So how do we get to that important and useful information underneath the complaint?

Any time someone is complaining, they (we) have a concern, a need or desire that they'd like met. Right, right, you say, that's obvious. But how often are we really clear about what that need or desire is?

Let's take an example: Say you are getting lots of complaints from people that they don't feel like they are in the loop about a set of decisions that are being made about a new initiative. Do you know what specific needs or desires lie under those complaints?

- Are they scared that some change is going to negatively affect them? What sorts of negative impacts are they fearing?
- Are they feeling like there are critical decisions they can't make, or tasks they can't do without knowing what those decisions are?
- Were they expecting to be consulted, or be part of the decision-making process and are feeling excluded?

There are lots of possibilities. And sometimes the people who are doing the complaining aren't even clear about what it is they want or need.

Since it is impossible to address a need we don't know about, the first step in moving from complaints to collaboration is to get that clarity.

### **Every Complaint is an Unvoiced Request**

Translating complaints into requests is a powerful way to create more clarity, more focus on solutions, better communication, and more generosity.

This translation takes a little practice, but it's not complicated.

#### **Step 1: Identify the Complaint**

Think about a real, live complaint you currently have. Write it down. Take a moment and just sit with it. Breathe. Feel whatever comes up for you when you have this complaint.

#### **Step 2: Self-Empathy**

Answer the question "What's hard about this behavior or situation for me?" We can't solve the problem unless we know what problem we are trying to solve, and our needs and feelings are definitely part of the "problem" we are trying to solve.

#### **Step 3: Examine Your Assumptions**

Answer the question "What assumptions am I making?" Then get curious about those assumptions. Are they true? How do you know? How can you fact-check them? Are they useful? What would be different if you let go of this assumption?

#### **Step 4: List All the Requests**

Now translate it into as many requests as you can think of — requests of other people, requests of yourself, requests of the universe, whatever you can come up with. A simple way to start is to ask yourself: **What do I want?**

Don't worry about whether these are requests you would ever make out loud, the first step is just to figure out what you are actually wanting.

#### **Step 5: Take Action – communicate this new understanding**

That said, the next step is to think about what actions you want take now, based on a new understanding of what you want. What requests could you make? What could you choose to do differently in response to your requests to yourself?

#### **So why is this useful?**

Notice the differences in your reaction to hearing:

“I'm so sick of how long it takes people to make decisions in this organization. I can't believe we still don't know whether the new initiative is going to happen.”

vs.

“When I don't know whether we are going to move forward on the new initiative, or even when that decision will get made, I get anxious because I am worried that I won't have enough time to create the systems I'd need to have in place to ensure that my team can implement our part of it.”

What is different for you?

Letting people know what we are experiencing (e.g. “I am worried...”) and what it is about the circumstances that are bringing up that feeling (e.g. uncertainty about the timeframe, concerns about workload), tends to create a sense of connection and generosity, very different than the resentment and defensiveness usually created by a complaint.

Making a specific request takes people out of the role of trying to figure out what you want/how to make it better for you, and gives them something specific to chew on. Even if they don't do what you asked them to do, the specificity of your request usually leads to your getting more information about what is happening and why and, often, helps generate creative solutions to the problem you're experiencing.

Going back to the example above, the request might be:

“Could you tell me what the process is for deciding whether to move forward, and when you’ll be able to tell us what you’ve decided?”

Or

“I’d like to request that we know at least six weeks before you need us to be ready to implement the new system so we can get our part done.”

## **Moving from Complaints to Collaboration in Your Organization**

To begin nurturing this process inside your organization or team, start with two basic steps:

### **STEP ONE**

Practice noticing your own complaints and rephrasing them as requests (of yourself, of others). Once you know what the requests are, you can decide whether to make them or not, but first you have to know what they are. Make a few requests, coupled with an expression of what you need, and see what happens.

### **STEP TWO**

Practice interrupting the complaint cycle when it starts with other people by getting curious and asking people what they want/need to make it better when you hear them complaining. See what emerges.

Once you are feeling comfortable, you can begin to use the process in meetings to get to the heart of what’s at issue when people are complaining. Try breaking people into triads and inviting them to do the translation of complaints to requests exercise using real examples and see what happens.

**This doesn’t have to be complicated; just keep returning to the idea that every complaint is an unvoiced request, and let yourself get curious.**

*This tool comes from my [“Tools for Getting Unstuck” workshop](#). For information on that and other workshops and training modules, or on facilitation and coaching services, go to my [website](#), or [contact me](#) via this link, or by phone or email: [Tasha@Tasha-Harmon.com](mailto:Tasha@Tasha-Harmon.com) or 503-788-2333.*

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