

Moving from Complaints to Collaboration With The People We Serve (and Each Other)

It's hard to collaborate with people who are always complaining. Many of the interactions we have when we are in service to others start with complaints, and while this is understandable, it is nonetheless draining for most of us.

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, pulling our energy down. Or, we respond with defensiveness (if they are about us, or others we care about), experiencing the complaint as a judgment.

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

We want our interactions with the people we serve (as well as with our co-workers, bosses, volunteers, etc.) to feel collaborative, and to encourage good work that moves us toward our goals. We 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 people often respond to them by becoming *less* receptive and responsive, rather than more.

A complaint is an attempt to deliver important information, but it seldom provides all of the information we need to be able to respond in useful ways. It is a flag that indicates someone's unease or discontent with a situation — a placeholder, telling us there is important information we need — but 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. 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 a person living in an affordable housing complex about their neighbor being "loud and obnoxious." Do you know what specific needs or desires lie under those complaints?

- Are they being triggered by the particular ways in which their neighbor behaves (perhaps due to something in their past)? What is coming up for them? What would help them not feel triggered?
- Are there specific impacts on their own lives (i.e. can't get their kids to sleep, or can't get enough sleep themselves, work at home and can't concentrate, etc.)? How could they get what they need?
- Are they feeling intimidated by this person and want help feeling safer?
- Are they feeling isolated and complaining about their neighbor is a way to connect with you/feel less alone?

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.

Practicing the Translation Process

Every complaint is an unvoiced request (or a group of unvoiced requests). Translating complaints into specific requests is a powerful way to create more clarity, more focus on solutions, better communication, and more generosity. Translation takes a little practice, but it's not complicated.

Try it out – on your own complaints first:

Step 1: Identify the Complaint

Think about a real, live complaint you currently have about another person/group of people you know, or a people-driven situation that you are an active part of. 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: 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 "realistic," or requests you would ever make out loud, the first step is just to figure out what you genuinely want.

Notice: When you go back and read these requests, in what ways do you feel different than when you were just reading/thinking about the complaint?

Step 3: Take Action – from this new understanding

Think about what actions you want to 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.”

Helping Others Translate Their Complaints to Requests

The most fundamental tool for helping people translate their complaints to requests is curiosity. When you hear someone complaining, the invitation is to notice that they are feeling vulnerable and have needs, and get curious about what they are experiencing and what they might want to request. It is often helpful to reflect back what you think you are hearing, with empathy, before trying to find out more. That might look like: “It sounds like this process has been very confusing for you and that you are feeling frustrated. I can certainly understand why you would feel that way.” Then, you might try asking a series of questions starting with “what” to see if you can help them tell you what they want. Some useful, basic “what” questions for this are:

- What is difficult/hard/challenging for you about this situation?
- What are you concerned about?
- What do you want to be different? (Or What do you need/want?)
- What do you need to know?
- What do you want me to do? (or How can I help with this?)
- What are you assuming (will happen, this means, etc.)?
- What would make it easy/easier/less difficult?

It is often useful to keep asking “what else?” as they start to respond to one of these questions, to make sure you get the whole list.

As you get answers, stay curious about those answers, asking more curiosity-based “what” questions to keep digging until you identify clear things that can be addressed, by you, by someone you can refer them to, or by actions they can take themselves.

In some cases, it can even be useful to introduce this “every complaint is an unvoiced request” idea to the person you are talking with; it can be illuminating for people to realize that they may be more effective at getting what they want if they simply change the WAY they are communicating. If you do start this conversation, you can use the first exercise above as a basis for working on this idea. (There is a [worksheet](#) for this on my website.)

This method can also be used when a person is making a specific request that you can’t honor (i.e. “evict them” or “move them (or me) to a different apartment,” to return to the initial example). If/When you say no, you are likely then to hear another set of complaints, this time about you and your organization. This too is an invitation to help the person more clearly identify the nuances of the problem(s)

they need solved, and to identify ways they can be proactive parts of solving those problems.

Moving from Complaints to Collaboration in Your Organization

To begin cultivating this skill 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.

STEP THREE

Invite staff to start trying this out with the people you serve. Set up time in staff meetings to debrief how this is working, support each other in trying it out, and make suggestions when people report feeling stuck in particular interactions. It's great to use this forum to tell success stories too!

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.

For information on workshops and training modules, or on facilitation and coaching services, go to my website, www.Tasha-Harmon.com or contact me via the phone or email in the footer.