

The Three Complaints Exercise

For use when things get tense/difficult in meetings

Sometimes when issues get contentious and tensions begin to build in meetings, it is useful to give people a productive way to complain. This gives them permission to say things they would not normally say, and often brings to the surface information that might otherwise stay hidden. The keys are to create a safe way for those complaints to be spoken, and to use the complaints as a springboard for forward movement, rather than getting bogged down in the energy of complaining. This exercise is designed to do just that. It may take 20-30 minutes, but is often well worth it.

1. Give the group an overview of the goals and the process of the exercise and set a clear time frame for it.
2. Hand each person three slips of paper (I recommend cutting a piece of standard paper in 6 strips, preserving the 8.5" as the length, so the writing stays legible), and ask each person to write down three complaints they have about the situation under discussion, each on a separate slip of paper.
3. Collect all the strips of paper in a hat or similar container.
4. Pull one out, read it, and **ask the group to**
 - a. **Reflect on what the person might be feeling (not thinking).**
Important note: Often what we call "feelings" are thoughts/a story about how we are being treated – i.e. put upon, disrespected, misunderstood, insulted, let down, left out, ignored, rejected, etc. Things that are actually feelings don't require another person. Examples are: anxious, frustrated, discouraged, sad, disappointed, lonely, confused, shaken. (You'll find a list of "Feelings" that Blame, and a Feelings and Needs List at www.wiseheartpdx.org under Handouts, Audio and Videos.)
 - b. **Translate the complaint into as many requests as they can think of.** This translation process is essentially a response to "what does this person want?" The person who wrote the complaint may or may not want to claim it as his or her own, and either way is fine. (You can use the categories on the other side of this sheet to spark a good list of requests.)
5. Do this with another randomly drawn complaint or two.
6. Ask each person to go back to her or his own complaints and spend a few minutes translating them into requests (generally 5-7 minutes is about right for this).
7. Invite the group to make any requests that they want to make of the group as a whole in service to moving forward on this issue. Note that other requests of the group can be made at other times (and make sure you create space for that), and that people are encouraged to make requests of individuals they may have written down if they think it will help them feel more comfortable, gain understanding, or participate more fully.

This was inspired by, and is an extension of, an exercise in the *Facilitator's Guide to Participatory Decision-Making* by Sam Kaner et. al.

Translating Complaints to Requests Exercise

The complaint: _____

Translate this complaint into as many requests as you can think of. Do NOT worry about whether they are (a) reasonable, or (b) a request you would actually make out loud. It is useful to try to list requests in each of the following categories:

- Requests of the person I am complaining to:
- Requests of the person I am complaining about (if different):
- Requests of other people (potential allies, friends/co-workers, partners, etc.):
- Requests of myself:
- Requests of God/the universe:

Try asking “what else” when you think you are done. Usually the most interesting possibilities emerge once you push past that point.

Once you have made your list of requests:

- Re-read the original complaint. What does it feel like in your body to do that?
- Re-read the requests. How is that different in your body?
- Identify which of these requests, if any, you are willing to say out loud or otherwise act on. (If you are not willing to act on the requests you are making of yourself, it would be useful to get curious about that.)
- Think about how and when you would like to do that, and whether you want any support in place before you do (that would be another request).