

HANDLING EMPLOYEE COMPLAINTS

Most employee handbooks contain some sort of reference to the organization's "open door" policy, and most managers like to think of themselves as approachable and willing to listen if an employee has a complaint. The fact of the matter often is, however, that managers really don't want to listen to disgruntled employees. Let's face it – complaining employees can really mess up our day! Strange as it may seem, however, wise managers actually **want** employees to complain – to them, that is. No matter how satisfied employees are, from time to time they will disagree with the way things are going in the organization. If not addressed, such discontent can be infectious, spreading like wildfire among the ranks. Employees who grumble among themselves cannot resolve a problem. Employee discontent has the best outcome for the organization if complaints are made to managers. After all, they are the people with the power to fix things!

Following are a few tips for managers about taking and answering employee complaints:

Take all complaints seriously. No matter how minor or insignificant the issue may seem to you, it is important to the person complaining.

Talk to people right away. When someone has a complaint, make time to listen. If you aren't able to listen when you are approached, make an appointment to meet with the employee within a day or two. If you put people off, they'll think you're not interested.

Probe for information. Don't assume, even when conclusions seem obvious. People sometimes minimize their part in a problem by omitting certain details.

Do not make people defend their complaints. Don't try to maneuver an employee into admitting his or her complaint is unfounded. Make it clear that you're interested in the problem and concerned with fair treatment. Remember, having the opportunity to complain is often more important than getting a complaint resolved.

Tell the person when to expect your answer. Guard against the temptation to give an answer immediately. By taking time to consider all angles and possible ramifications of the problem and its solution, you will likely give a better answer. You should, however, discuss what you plan to do and let the employee know when you'll have an answer. It's best to schedule a time to meet again.

When answering an employee complaint, concentrate on what is right. People are irritated by "party line" answers. Be willing to go to bat with your supervisor on behalf of an employee who is right.

If you were wrong, admit it. Everyone admires a person who can admit mistakes. Don't let your pride cause you to uphold a bad decision. Apologize, if appropriate. A sincere apology will help you gain respect.

If you were right, explain why. Complaints often arise because of a misunderstanding concerning rules, policies, or procedures. Explain what happened and why it was appropriate. Chances are if one person has misunderstood, others have as well, so consider whether it is worthwhile to advise everyone on the work team about the rule, policy, or procedure.

Discuss the matter objectively. Stay with facts about what you did and what the outcome was. Do not belittle or demean the other person. This is sometimes difficult, particularly if the complaint is directed at you.

Pave the way for discussions with others. If you are unable to resolve the employee's complaint to his or her satisfaction, make arrangements for the employee to meet with someone else to discuss the situation further. That someone else may be your supervisor, another member of the work team, or someone in Human Resources.