

Working With Difficult Customers and Persistent Complainants

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Complainants: The Problems if Not Handled Correctly

- Disrupts the organisation
- Create chaos in their and sometimes our lives
- Potential for threats and violence
- Consume disproportionate amounts of time and energy
- Private-Public Dichotomy Terminology: Public Sector
- The Abusive
- The Persistent/Serial
- The Vexatious
- The Organised

Terminology: The Private Sector

- Intimidators
- Clams
- Know it Alls
- Indecisives

What do “Normal Complainants” Want?

- Obtain attention
- Receive explanation/apology
- Protect other people
- Receive compensation
- Obtain “justice” or protect a “principle”
- Wants emotional engagement
- Seek retribution

Understanding Complaining Behaviour

- The “normal complainant”
 - Aggrieved by loss

- Redress sought
- May be difficult at times
- Maintains perspective
- Cost/benefit analysis

Turning the Normal Complainant into the Difficult Complainant

- Delay
- Lack of recognition
 - Emotional engagement
 - Cognitive engagement
- Inappropriate attitude
- Pre-existing psychological condition

The Difficult Complainant

- The aggressive obtains pleasure from complaining
- Cost-benefit analysis is less important to ventilation and vindication
- Likely to feel victimized
- Still focused on causal event but seeing wider rationalisations
- Will engage in range of difficult behaviours
- Will use third parties more readily
- Will settle

Typical Difficult Behaviours

- “tape playing”
- “rat “wheeling”
- “ping pong”
- “mutual monologues”
- Monosyllables
- Blame
- Helplessness
- “looking for a friend”

The Persistent Complainant

- Persistent complainants are more than persistent
- At top of dispute pyramid

- Heterogeneous
- Aggrieved by loss
- Indignant
 - Egocentric
 - Themes of victimization
 - External causes

Possible Pathologies

- Delusional
- Schizophrenia
- Obsessive-compulsive
- Paranoid Personality Disorder

Danger Signs

- Life's meaning becomes subsumed into grievance
- Large volumes of excitable and over emphasised communications
- Diverted working capacity
- Hypercompetency in law
- Neglecting other life areas
- Focus on grievances/multiplication
- Increasing disorganisation

Typical Behaviours: Persistent Complainants First Stage (Primary Morbid Querulousness)

- Initial grievance morph into multiples
- Victimisation with egocentric ideas of reference and entitlement
- The quest takes over impinging on personal, interpersonal and social functioning
- Seeking vindication and vengeance not compensation
- Resolution becomes secondary and demands will change if compensation offered

Typical Behaviours: Persistent Complainants Second Stage (Secondary Morbid Querulousness)

- May not be situationally determined grievance
- Grievances derive from delusions associated with pre-existing mental illness
- Bizarreness appears
- Difficult to define grievance and possible resolution

Some key Indicators for the Persistent Complainant

- 72% male
- Multiple “approaches”
- Unannounced appearances
- Overuse of underlining, capitalisation and extravagant expressions
- More likely to ask for change of caseworker
- Overly ingratiating

- Apologies more frequently asked for
- Seek acknowledgement of wider social imp’s
- 17% overt threats
- 32% veiled threats
- 10% could express grievances in coherent/rational manner

Management: The 6 V’s

- Recognition is the key to unlocking the door
 - Volatile emotions
 - Feel victimised
 - Seek vindication
 - Produce voluminous and vague communications
 - Vary their demands

Management: The Need for Policy

- To ensure fairness and consistency
- To support staff
- To effectively manage resources
- To set clear boundaries for the complainant

Management: Good Practice

- Early resolution
- Speedy escalation
- Clarity and flexibility
- Emotional engagement
- Allocate the persistent to a particular person or team
- Provide support for staff

Managing Emotions

- Identify
 - Positive and neutral
 - Love, joy, surprise
 - Negative
 - Anger, sadness, fear
- Allow to vent
- Do not dismiss

Managing the Moment

- Make sure you are not the difficult one
- Do not be drawn into a “fight”
- Remain calm
- If not sure say nothing
- STAR it
- Think about your good clients/customers

Effective Process

- Keep it conversational
- Relax the other
- Show a personal interest
- Establish confidence and trust/offer to help
- Get the other to talk/tell their story
- Make yourself listen/take notes
- Talk in the others language
- Accept emotions without criticism/let them vent
- Allow sufficient time
- Listen carefully to the final casual remarks

Verbal Jujitsu: The Basics

- STAR IT!
- JOIN
- FOCUS
- COLLABORATE OR NEGOTIATE

Rules of Engagement: The Persistent Complainant

- Context
- Adequate time and information
- Unstructured time to speak
- Reframe goals from revenge/vindication to reparation
- Avoid becoming their saviour
- Do not cut off pathways to progress claims
- Make firm rules about appropriate behaviour
- Maintain professional boundaries
- Transparent written communications – avoid oral agreements
- Acknowledge errors
- Confront misconceptions
- Label unrealistic perceptions and offer practical solutions
- Focus on real grievance
- Take threats seriously
- Plan termination

Structuring the Meeting

- Social engagement
- Agenda setting
- Information gathering
- Verification and testing of obtained information
- Option generation and evaluation
- Plan for outcomes
- Summary and clarification/planning
- Conclusion and separation

Some useful references

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