

ON LEADERSHIP

Gary Burnison

Chief Executive Officer, Korn Ferry



Why I Love Complainers

Airplanes, restaurants, the workplace—these are the three worst places on the planet for spawning complainers. In the air, it comes from being strapped in among strangers at 35,000 feet—plus delays, lost luggage, and the toenail-clipper sitting next to you. Restaurants just bring out the complainer in almost everyone. *The soup's too hot... The soup's too cold... Are you sure it's vegan? ...* When I was in high school, I lasted one six-hour shift in a restaurant—I just couldn't take it.

But when it comes to constant complaining, there's nothing like the workplace, where whispers at the watercooler spread negativity like the plague. That's death to creativity. I learned this many years ago when I was working at a consulting firm. Seven of us were on a project together. We had different backgrounds and perspectives, which should have made us highly innovative. Except, one of our teammates was “Debby Downer.” With every scenario, Debby only saw the worst possible outcome. She shot down new ideas like a skeet shooter at target practice. *But that will never work... But we tried that before... But it's just too risky... But no one will go for it... But how's that going to work with the budget we have?*

Nothing shoots down a group discussion faster than “but.” One person floats an idea, and another

jumps in with “but” (or similar negative words and nonverbals). What comes next is always negative, and it invariably leads to disagreement. (That's why, to improve effectiveness, I suggest replacing “but” with “and.” *That's an interesting idea, and you might also consider X.* You can actually feel the energy in the room start to rise.)

Debby wasn't intentionally trying to derail the team; she was just hardwired never to see the blue sky—only “the sky is falling.” With Debby around, even great ideas turned into bad ideas. She brought us all down, really down. In the end, the constant complaining was so emotionally taxing, we were not successful.

It's so easy to be in the problems business—there's always a situation or circumstance to complain about it. But I'm not complaining! I actually



welcome complainers and the complaints that bring issues out into the open, with one important caveat: complaining needs to be constructive—that is, accompanied by an idea, solution, or at least some additional insight.

When fielding complaints, my number one rule for myself and others is never to complain about a decision or a situation you created. Own it! It's the fastest way to change your karma from being the victim of circumstances to being empowered to change them. Take control and find an option—Door A, B, or C. This shifts everyone from “helpless and hopeless” to “helpful and happier.”

Welcoming Conflict

There's nothing inherently wrong with complaints, the same way there's nothing wrong with conflict. Both can spark the creative process as people own the problem and brainstorm with each other. In fact, leaders need to become comfortable sparking creative conflict. Otherwise, people will only say what they think leaders want to hear. This means people will nod you to death, saying “yes, yes, yes,” when they really mean “no, no, no.” That dynamic suppresses issues and blocks solutions. The only way to expose the truth is to trigger conflict.

Just recently, I knew that a few members of a team were in conflict over a project. Yet each person assured me everything was fine. This went on for several weeks. I knew the conflict had to come out, so I called an impromptu meeting and triggered a discussion that quickly got heated. It was an emotional exchange, but ultimately a very healthy one as underlying issues were revealed. Only then could we finally explore the solutions. For that to happen, though, it had to be safe for people to tell the truth. There can be no repercussions for what's said, and complaints must lead to solutions.

Leaders need to be in the solutions business. I received this advice soon after I became CEO. At one of my first board meetings, I raised problem after problem. Someone pulled me aside afterward and told me, “If you want advice, fine. But come to the board with ideas of what to do. You need to be the solutions person, not the complaint guy.” When you're the one who suggests a solution, it helps create positive momentum—even if it's ultimately not the right answer to the problem.

To get to this place, though, it takes a spark. So bring on those complaints—just make sure they come with ideas. ▀