

How to Complain

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Earlier this semester, I received a complaint from an applicant who we had opted not to hire. In his email, which he also sent to a parade of others, he said that — given his obvious qualifications — he was both surprised and angered by the rejection. He was so angry, in fact, that he called for the hiring supervisor and several others to be terminated for incompetence.

Fair process is important to me so I looked into the situation to determine if there was anything to the conspiracy he described. I soon learned that the position was not going to be filled and the department was in the process of sending out notification letters to all the applicants. I sent our angry correspondent a brief message explaining all of that and expressing regret that we had inconvenienced him. The applicant — clearly needing to get in the last word — responded with a series of messages condemning my writing skills, integrity, and personal character.

As a vice president of business affairs and human resources, I talk to a lot of unhappy people and I generally understand their perspectives. I know that it is normal to want to express frustration and demand justice, when we feel we have been wronged. We might want to lash out, punish, and spread the word. But having seen the difference in outcomes that result from complaining well — versus complaining poorly — I know for certain that taking a more measured approach tends to yield better results.

Do you have a grievance to air? Here are some tips to consider:

- **Gather your facts.** Make it easy to research and resolve your concerns. When did this bad thing happen? Who gave you information and/or misinformation? What, exactly, were you told?

- **Think Twitter, rather than *War and Peace*.** You are requesting assistance to fix something, not writing a novel. Multi-page missives are rarely effective, so get to the point quickly in your complaint and keep your message brief.
- **Ask for help.** Do it politely: "I'm hoping you can help me understand ...," is often a good way to start.
- **Be curious, not furious.** Express surprise and curiosity rather than outrage about your situation. Assume goodwill rather than intentional malice.
- **Don't make things worse by hurling insults.** Phrases like "classic bureaucratic incompetence," "overpaid clerk," and "oppressive administrative overlords" are not generally helpful.
- **Ask for what you want.** Be specific about your desired remedy.
- **Target your message.** While sending a complaint to multiple people might seem like a smart strategy, it usually backfires. When seven people receive a complaint, each assumes the other six will handle it.
- **Don't start with social media.** We've all heard stories about people who had wrongs righted after posting something embarrassing on Facebook or Twitter, but this is not usually the most effective approach. Embarrassing an employer or service provider does not engender a willingness to deal with your grievance. In general, it is prudent to reserve social-media rants for situations in which all other avenues have been exhausted.
- **Start in the right place.** Rather than target your complaint to the university president, send your concern to the person best positioned to handle it. Presidents, provosts, and deans get hundreds of messages each day, so starting at that level of the administrative hierarchy is likely to only delay a possible remedy.
- **Be judicious in copying the next level up.** It is tempting to punish people who have wronged us by making sure their supervisors know of their "incompetence." You don't need to create trouble or embarrassment. If the first level won't or can't help you, then travel up the chain, but give people a chance to fix your problem.
- **Don't think threatening us with legal action will make us move faster.** Sure, go ahead, hire a lawyer if you want. But you might be better off by first trying to resolve things more cheaply and quickly without the lawyers involved. Once you "go legal," there will be fewer people to resolve your issue and reaching resolution will generally take longer.

If you have managed your complaint well and your concern has been resolved, it will be time for you to express appreciation. Yes, I know you shouldn't have to take the time to thank someone who originally did you wrong, but it feels good to be thanked. When we express kindness to others, they are more likely to seek additional opportunities to make things right for the next person who has a problem — and that may benefit us again in the future.

Further —and this is important — closing the loop well enables you to redefine your relationship with the person who initially caused you harm. The two of you are now partners, rather than adversaries, and should you need assistance or want to engage in the future, you may have an advocate rather than an opponent.

