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[Using Ombudsmen for Employee and Organizational...]

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**USING OMBUDSMEN FOR EMPLOYEE AND
ORGANIZATIONAL DEVELOPMENT**

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Ombudsman Definitions & Comment

Definition: "a term that refers to a special office or officer to whom people can go with their grievances about the way their business with large anonymous bureaucracies has been handled. The ombudsman records public complaints, investigates them, and reports the findings to the complainants and the organizations investigated. Should any wrong be discovered, it is expected that it will be put right, if not to the complete satisfaction of the aggrieved party, then at least better than it would have been without the ombudsman's intervention. For the public, the ombudsman is a welcome device for assuring that justice is done and that bureaucracies treat their clients fairly, promptly, and respectfully. For bureaucracies, it is an additional fail-safe check on their operations to ensure that any mistakes that have not been spotted are eventually caught and rectified, and it also serves to identify unintentional impacts of otherwise well-intentioned procedure. Where wrong has been done, it points to maladministration that needs to be corrected, and where wrong has not been done, it reinforces current operating practices. Thus, it provides additional protection for both public and bureaucracy, something that seems required as transactions between them multiply."

G.E. Caiden, N. MacDermot, A. Sandler

Definition: "a neutral member of the corporation who provides confidential informal assistance in resolving employee work-related complaints and who is outside the normal management structure" Ombudsman News

Comment:

"First, ombudsmanship works in small ways its wonders to perform....

Second, the ombudsman's greatest role is that of teacher rather than governor. He does not command. He persuades....

Third, the ombudsman should not be viewed as an acceptable substitute for parliamentary or ministerial responsibility...."

W. Gellhorn

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Handling Employee Complaints

by James T. Ziegenfuss, Jr., Ph.D., M.P.A.



*Feel swamped by employee complaints?
Learn how to listen and use these complaints
to make your job easier and your organization more productive.*

Do employees complain?
Do birds fly?

Employee complaints are commonplace in all organizations. That fact must be taken as a starting assumption about the way the organizational world is.

The real question is: How does your company handle complaints? And how do you handle them as an employee services and recreation manager?

Are they ignored and repressed, or acknowledged and responded to? This last response—acknowledgement and resolution—is the subject for this article for several important reasons.

First, it is rapidly becoming known that "good" organizations (i.e. those with high productivity and high quality of working life) spend a large amount of time and energy listening to their employees and consumers.

In Search of Excellence reinforced and broadened our recognition of this fact. Top companies use this "listening" as a way to learn of both successes and organizational failures—what they are doing well and what needs to be changed or improved.

Second, linked to this rationale is an understanding that this organizational learning has payoffs for the bottom line. At a highly general and simplified level, organizations want to recognize and do more of what they do well and change or stop what they are not doing well. The latter costs lost time, energy and money, regardless of whether the organization is manufacturing toasters or automobiles, or is providing patient care. In short, if you listen well your organization will do better.

What does this mean? It means that all organizations should be handling employee complaints. And to become more effective managers and communicators, employee services professionals must become experts in this area.

WHY HANDLE COMPLAINTS?

Although it may seem a bother—ignoring the problem is often a lot easier—there are a number of primary reasons for complaint processing. Among them:

- To identify the individual problems and class-or system-wide problems of employees and consumers;
- To investigate the complaints, thereby establishing the facts of the situation;
- To determine why the problem developed and how it might be resolved;
- To feedback the above information to the complainants, the subject of the complaints and the appropriate management personnel;
- To generate and help create responses to the problems, solving both individual problems and classes of problems;
- To monitor the problems to insure that the solutions do actually emerge.¹

Good organizations *listen* and *use* complaints to help change and develop the organization. Corporations have to assign someone the responsibility for this work—that is the next question.

WHICH CORPORATIONS AND WHO IS RESPONSIBLE?

IBM, American Express, TWA, Tektronix, Chemical and Citibank, McDonalds, Singer Co., Northrop and Florida Power and Light are among the corporations identified by *Time* and *Business Week* as having a complaint taking and processing activity.

The activities involved in these various employee complaint programs run on a continuum from highly formal to highly informal. Some are formally

recognized programs with staff and support services, while others are a single individual taking complaints, investigating and problem-solving.

Employee relations manager, counselor, corporate ombudsman, equal employment opportunity specialist, human relations specialist, employee communications director, public relations specialist, employee representative and human resources director are among the range of titles used to describe complaint handlers. Increasingly, employee services managers are taking on this hat as well.

Knowing that there are programs and individuals providing this activity leads us rationally to a follow-up question about the nature of their work.

WHAT TYPE OF COMPLAINTS SHOULD BE HANDLED?

Research into the extent of activity in a wide range of industries from manufacturing to health care suggests that complaint topics are equally diverse. This is essentially true. The following is a sample of common complaint topics:

- personnel policies
- physical conditions
- recreational activities
- sexual harassment
- discrimination
- supervisory conflict
- interdepartmental conflict
- production processes
- personality conflicts
- personal problems
- general dispute resolution

Good employee complaint programs consider *no* complaints to be insignificant. Sincere listening and a concern for resolution is the guiding principle. There is, however, some natural sort-

Complaints

ing out as larger problems displace smaller ones in priority.

HOW ARE COMPLAINTS HANDLED?

The individual actions and methods of complaint takers varies from company to company, but there seem to be five steps that are somewhat generic to complaint handling. These were distilled from a review of work in many industries.

Step 1. Identify the complaint. Review the general problem as to facts and context, then reduce the complaint to a specific one sentence problem. Establish and define the primary problem, then establish and define secondary problem(s), if any.

Step 2. Investigate the complaint. Further clarify the problem, outlining a procedure for investigation and presentation of the results. Discuss the facts and context of the case and create relevant and specific recommendations. This step also involves further problem clarification, procedures for investigation, presentation of the review results, discussion and recommendations.

Step 3. Feed back the investigation results. Examine the participants' responses for agreement, disagreement or apathy, tailoring the follow-up to the participants' position. This will require a written report and face-to-face review.

Step 4. Develop responses to the problems. By listening and reflecting, collaborating on the creation of solutions and independently suggesting alternatives, an agreeable response should be generated.

Step 5. Monitor the response plans to insure follow-through. Examine multiple systems changes according to their proposed time schedule.²

The processing steps are the same for all types of complaints. A fictitious example will illustrate.

In one corporation several employees were heard to complain that the

softball umpires for the company tournament had been asked to favor one division team over the others. Divisional business competition was at a high level and it carried over into the sports activity.

The corporation's "ombudsman" (the employee services manager) was presented with the complaint after two employees decided it was too "risky" to surface the problem directly with their divisional boss.

"Good" organizations—those with high productivity and high quality of working life—spend a large amount of time listening to their employees, including complaints.

The employee services manager began by collecting specifics about the complaint. How was the one team favored by the umpires—calling strikes and balls; close calls on the baselines, etc.? Which umpires were involved? What were the days and specific examples? Who could corroborate the statements?

A secondary problem was identified relating to the negative aspects of the intensity of the competition. This was noted but was not the specific subject of the complaint.

The facts were gathered by talking to the umpires, players and divisional managers. The allegation was found to be true, but it applied only to the last game played. The employee services manager asked for suggestions on how to resolve it. There was rather quick agreement on a replay of the game, with consensus on downplaying the reasons. The employee services manager suggested a meeting of the two

teams to clarify the problem and diminish the negative aspects.

There was consideration of whether this was a common problem in other sports activities. It was decided by the employee services and recreation department to address the "level of competition" problem in a series of light memos and team discussions. Subsequent softball games and other activities were monitored over the next three months.

This brief example indicates the usefulness of a third party investigator and the steps in the process. There are complaints that are more serious than this—sexual harassment, discrimination and dangerous physical conditions, but this recreational activity is an important part of the corporate culture that must be maintained.

A key point to remember is that all complaints should be investigated since the seemingly less significant ones often have very serious additional components. In this case, the corporation also had to address (after this case was dealt with) the problem of what level of competitive intensity is desirable. Thus, a single complaint raises an organizational level issue.

IMPROVING THE CORPORATE CULTURE

We have just considered why complaints are taken seriously by organizations, who is doing complaint processing and how they work. In closing we should consider what the presence of complaint processing means in terms of corporate culture, a current topic of high interest.

As noted in *Patient/Client/Employee Complaint Programs: An Organizational Systems Model*, "With an organizational complaint program in existence, the corporate culture stresses the following policies:

1. The corporation believes in organizational listening.
2. The corporation believes in individual and organization-wide problem solving.

3. The corporation believes in communicating to consumers and employees (open communication).
4. The corporation believes that employees and management need consultation assistance in solving organization problems."³

Complaint handling work is on the increase nationally, with many organizations just getting into the act. There is little doubt that many more organizations will vigorously embrace the concept and support those employees now doing it informally.

As chief executives recognize the value of these programs, there will be increasing development in both private and public organizations. Whether identified as complaint, advocacy or corporate ombudsman programs, the design of such programs can insure that they are valuable organizational development tools which aid organization diagnosis and change. Any program that helps to surface structure and process problems is one that presents those persons responsible with an opportunity to take corrective action, keeping the corporation dynamic and healthy.⁴

Whether there is a formal program or one individual with complaint handling responsibility, the message to employees is clear: *Our organization values what all employees have to say. We want communication, including complaints, and the organization will respond!*

This is the mark of a desirable place to work—an organization where you can make a difference. ☞

James T. Ziegenfuss, Jr., Ph.D., M.P.A., is the author of four books and more than thirty journal and conference articles on a variety of topics, including Patient/Client/Employee Complaint Programs: An Organizational Systems Model, which is available from Charles C. Thomas, Publisher.

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2. Ziegenfuss, pp. 79-80.
3. Ziegenfuss, p. 6.
4. Ziegenfuss, p. 19.