

What Do You Do When People Complain about You?

by Margaret J. Marcuson

Leaders often get defensive when people complain. The complaints may come directly or indirectly; they may be specific or general. Someone may say, "People are saying--" Or, "Susan said to me--" Or, less frequently they may say directly, "I think--"

Complaints often provoke anxious responses. Sometimes we rigidly insist on staying on track, without considering the complaint. Or we adapt too readily, asking in effect, "What can I do to make you happy?" Both approaches can get in the way of achieving our goals: a rigid response can lead us into head-to-head conflict unnecessarily, and an adaptive response can reduce our efforts to the lowest common denominator, trying to please everyone.

A thoughtful response to complaints is better for everyone. It's important to remember that complaints are rarely about the content raised, whether someone thinks you are too busy, too long-winded, not friendly enough, too organized, too disorganized, or any of a hundred items that might be raised about a leader. Rather, they are about the relationship the complainer has with the leader and with the group, and with what is going on in the group as a whole. Edwin Friedman used to say, "Criticism is a form of pursuit." People who are very critical want to have some kind of relationship with the leader. Recognizing this fact can lower your anxiety, and help you respond more thoughtfully. Remember, the complaint is not really about you.

Here are some tips for handling complaints that come your way:

1. Don't get defensive. Easier said than done, I know. If you can manage your automatic defensive response, the complaints are less likely to spiral out of control. Work on your relationship with the complainer without trying to convince them they are wrong about you.

2. Be grateful. If there were no complaints, you might not be taking enough stands as a leader. Complaints are part of the pushback all leaders can expect when they move forward with an initiative: they are the price of progress.

3. Don't panic about third-party complaints. Consider the source: someone who often reports of what others think is not the most mature person. Apply tip number 1, and don't get defensive.

4. Take a look at yourself while you're at it. We all have weaknesses. If you genuinely made a mistake or need to work on a specific area, apologize.

(Thanks to reader Rebecca Maccini for raising this issue in a comment on my blog.)

<http://www.margaretmarcuson.com/>