

## Dealing With A Chronic Complainer

### QUESTION:

*I've been in this position for only a few months, but it seems that one particular partner has been in my office every week complaining about something. It's either about how I should be exercising more management authority over some other partner or the way certain things are being done. Thankfully, this character is a productive contributor and does not appear to be sharing his gripes with everyone else. I'm quite comfortable dealing with any partner who's not pulling their weight, but this constant whining is definitely getting to me. What do you do with partners like this?*

### RESPONSE:

First, you described the whining partner as "a productive contributor." Often even the most productive contributors are needy . . . they need to be told how productive and important they are. This neediness manifests itself in many ways, but the periodic visits and advice may just be an effort to fish for positive reinforcement. (Somebody needs to tell them "thank you.") It's sometimes easy to think that spending time with the needy is a waste of time and a diversion from really important substantive tasks. In fact, making "a productive contributor" feel appreciated and good about him or herself is pretty high up on the really important parts of your managing partner role.

Secondly, listening, even to whining, instructions, and complaints, comes with the territory. Since you are a new managing partner, there is probably a certain amount of testing occurring. It will probably bleed off over time. Also, your frequent visitor may be of the view that you do not yet have a solid grasp on the controls. He or she will eventually get tired of giving instructions. However, be warned that not listening is just going to alienate him. Letting him play it out by listening and responding, in the long run, will probably help build the support base that you need to have to do a good job.

Some veteran managing partners have discovered the wisdom of making an effort to stick their heads in to say hello to these type of partners, while on their "rounds." They have found that the effort to be proactive dramatically reduces the complainer's visits. It is also easier to exit when you are the one stopping by.

Further, while constant complainers can suck up a lot of energy, is there some legitimacy to any of their comments? You may want to look at how you are now feeling about this partner. If your attitude toward his complaining is negative, you may want to just suspend that negativity for a while. Focus on perceiving him as potentially having valuable input and capable of providing a positive remedial approach to some of these complaints. Even the whiners have good ideas. Don't dismiss the sermonettes in their entirety or necessarily discourage them. They are information – either ideas you can use or information about the sermonizer that may be valuable down the line.

You're likely not to know what this partner's next complaint will be, but you can formulate some optional approaches for how to respond the next time he (or any partner) comes into your office. Here are some suggestions to consider:

- Listen carefully, ask a lot of questions about how your complaining partner would handle the situation or personal issue in question and why. You may want to explain why you are doing things the way you are (without coming across as either defensive or apologetic) and then tell the complainer that you will think about what they have told you, and perhaps even seek some advice and counsel from others. As previously mentioned, our experience is that most people are satisfied if they are heard, and their views are treated respectfully and considered.

- Another possibility for the partner who obviously is interested in what is going on within the firm, but expresses his/her interest through complaints would be to assign that partner a job, a temporary task force to lead, or some sort of responsibility. Having a role that would acquaint the partner with the challenges of leadership might give the partner a new perspective.

- Ask your partner to generate a list of possible solutions to his or her complaint. Acknowledge the concern while directing your conversation toward the importance of solving the problem and not just venting. Then ask him to go away and give some thought to generating a list of at least four possible alternative solutions. Suggesting the number four should prevent him from simply telling you what you should be doing to solve the issue. Making him go away should be done in a manner that informs him that you value his views and would really welcome his further and serious reflection on the situation that he raised.

Asking for their solutions to their complaint is a good tactic. When a partner has to think about an issue with a view toward finding a solution, many times they realize that the solution it is not as simple as they might have thought. By taking this approach, you reinforce the principle that venting about a problem is insufficient without also coming forward with some possible options for how to correct the situation.

- Finally, don't be hesitant to inform some partner, who habitually drops into your office, that you are currently in the midst of something else and ask if the two of you might find another time to meet. Many complaints are spur of the moment, based on an irritant that just occurred. After a partner has time to think about the matter, he or she often comes to the conclusion on their own, that it was not as important as they initially thought. However, if you do this, you must get back to the partner (preferably in their office) so they do not get the impression that you are just blowing him off.

It is worth emphasizing that in the managing partner's world, the immediate tends to drive out the important, and it is possible to spend 80% of your time on the 20% least valuable people or issues. Finding efficient ways to handle these situations or discouraging repetitive, time-consuming "visits" is important.

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