

Transcription - Managing A Complaint About A Peer Manager

Welcome back. I'm Kim Baillie, she's Fulyana Orsborn and this is Inside Exec. Today we're going to look at an issue that can be very difficult to manage and I think we might have interesting views on how to do this. It's about how you handle as a manager, how you handle a complaint about a peer manager, someone who is managing at the same level as you but the complaint is by their staff. That team has come to you to complain about their manager.

Firstly, I would hope that in an organisation of any size where you're talking about this, if there sort of level of interaction, that there is some process that you can follow. That there is some process for the staff and that there is some process for you as well as the manager.

Let's first of all look at if there isn't a process. Obviously if there is a process, you fall back on the process which makes it simpler and more structured in the way you look at it. Let's say for this example that my staff have gone to Fulyana to complain about me. How is she going to handle it?

What I'm going to do is, I'm going to be a bit puzzled to start off with. A bit puzzled in that, why did they come to me? Keep myself from being distracted with any of that "they come to me because they think I'm better" or "I'm a better leader" or "I have a better reputation", all of that. Don't go there. That's rubbish, park it. The other thing is thinking I don't want to be involved in it and I can do without that, I've got my own problems. Don't go there either. This person has come to you. You don't know anything about it at the moment. So the very, very, very very first thing you do is listen and hear what the person has to say.

It's very, very difficult situation to be in because you listen and that could be anything. The complaint must be about something as simple as we just don't get on, we just keep clashing, or it could be really, really inflexible or the person is this or that or the other. It could be much more serious. It could be bullying or victimization, or whatever, whatever, whatever.

So there's not one size fits all situations. The first thing is to listen and try to figure out what the person is saying. And keep remembering, you're only hearing one side of the story. Once you do that, I think that the key and the action would be to try to encourage and empower the complainant to handle it themselves. Absolutely right if there is a process, draw on that and draw on putting them on that track, but I would just ask questions like, have you thought of approaching her with that? Have you had any communication.

The difficulty here is by doing that, by not starting the investigation yourself, you're getting in and you're becoming part of it too prematurely when there is a process for it. Let the person know that you have heard them and to say it. I would say - I know you, you're a good person. I don't know you that well, but from what I hear, and blah, blah, blah. However, I am only hearing your side and sometimes it's an interpretation and I really think that's why we have processes and the process is there to be followed.

Where it becomes really difficult, is when the person says things like no, no I don't want to make it formal, I really don't want you to do anything about it. I knew I could trust you so I came to tell you.

At that point in time when I get to that point, if it was me in that situation, I start getting really annoyed. The reason for that is, how can I help you if you just tell me do nothing? The difficulty is, just say you said to do nothing, I did nothing and then something goes terribly wrong. Would you, as a good leader in an organization, be satisfied with that? The answer is, I wouldn't. Yet I have to tread carefully, so I don't think it's wrong to say to the person - look if it is minor and you told me but you don't want me to do anything. So my recommendation is that you go and resolve it directly and follow the process or let's talk it through. If you're saying to me no, or particularly if it's a bigger problem than that, then say I'm really, really sorry, I can't not do anything about it. I have an obligation as a member of the leadership team, as a member of this team, remember our culture, remember our objectives. I would go back on all of those. Not just words, we live by them and I have responsibilities towards you, the organization and your boss in doing something about it. So me doing something about it might be that I'm going to leave it to you to be the lead on this or I can help you get onto the process. I can be there but I'm not going to take over this and I'm not going to do nothing.

I think that probably the steps in the process, the practical things are ones that we can talk. First and foremost, right at the start when this person comes to you, ask why are you coming to me? What are you expecting that I will do about this? And as a result of that, make it clear that you're going to record or keep notes of the discussion because you've got to have something that records the interaction that you've had in the event that you do need to do other things later on. So it's not about let's sit down and have a chat. It's action. It's formal action in that someone has come outside of their work environment to another work environment to talk to you. So you do need to put some structure around it and the structure protects everybody from misinterpretations, from forgotten bits

of information, from straying from the path of a step-by-step process to resolve the problem. So those two questions first, and making sure that everyone in the situation is aware that you will be taking notes and you will be keeping a record of it.

If they say I don't want to do anything, I just want to talk to you about it, then you go down the path of why me? If you're not expecting me to do anything about it, you're taking this time out of your work day as well as my work day, what is the end result that you're looking for? Is it just that you wanted to talk to someone? So if you just wanted to talk to someone, do you not have a mentor in this organization? If you don't have a mentor in this organization, have you thought about getting one? Basically coming to me, what you're looking for is someone independent to help you think about this situation. And that's what I mentor is for. And it doesn't have to be anything too structured. But perhaps, what you need in terms of your work environment and managing yourself in your work environment, is a mentor relationship with someone.

And while you're in that situation too, if you realize maybe the process is non-existent or that process is not clear or not communicated, whatever, then you can, with total respect to confidentiality and without referring to that situation, you have responsibilities as the leader to actually contribute to improving that. Maybe at the next training we should contribute to make that more visible and more clear.

If you're in a situation where you're the person who has built up the courage to go and talk to someone outside of your work environment about the situation and I say to you why did you come to me and you haven't thought about that, it is something that needs to be done. It's not about finding the willing ear, you do need to be clear about the problem, think about how could be fixed. Because if you're not part of the solution, you're part of the problem and that might help you resolve it. It might mean that if the problem is that there is no consistency in communication and it's aggravating and for some reason, perhaps, you don't feel empowered to bring it up or find a way of resolving that within the team. They're going to go to someone else and ask how do you do communication in your team? Because in our team it's just rubbish. We all find out differently.

Thinking about what the solution might be, might give you enough information to be able to suggest the solution and not make it personal, asking can have a central point for this information and we don't want to send out volumes of all the information that we might get.

So don't just be the problem or the problem identifier without a solution because sometimes the solution to what you see as a personal problem will present itself in thinking about the broader picture.

A topic for another podcast could be from the other manager's perspective - the one being complained about. It's a different topical altogether, how you found out, when you found out and how to react, separating the personal reaction from the professional reaction which is the hardest thing to do. We will leave it there and we will talk about that from the other side of the complaint situation.

For now I'm Kim Baillie, she's Fulyana Orsborn and this is Inside Exec.