

Responding to Questions & Complaints

Why is this important?

First, being able to express a concern or ask a question is absolutely critical to maintaining healthy relationships within the organization—whether with management or co-workers. Our personal sense of well-being and productivity can also be impacted if we feel as though we can't talk to someone about an issue.

Second, people assign a great deal of meaning to how we respond to difficult questions. It's one of the moments that defines who we are for them.

Fundamental principles

We are more effective when we have time to respond in a thoughtful way rather than simply reacting to a situation. The following principles provide the foundation to being able to create responses that work.

- People who ask questions, surface issues, challenge our thinking, and complain are on our side.
- Don't ask for input or feedback unless you are prepared to deal with it thoroughly in a timely fashion.
- People need clarity, not certainty, to deal with difficult times.
- People need to feel they have truly been heard.
- If you trust yourself and others in conversation, it will turn out.
- What you resist in a conversation, will persist.
- Behind every complaint is a request that would resolve the issue.

Fundamental processes

Listening to questions:

- Listen intently, without interruption, until they finish.
- Check for clarity and understanding if necessary.
- Reflect back the points if there are multiples.
- Thank the person for asking the question.

Responding to questions:

- It is critical that each question be treated seriously and thoroughly.
- This does not mean that each question must be answered on the spot.
- It does mean that the person asking the question should know what to expect in terms of a response and when to expect it before moving on to the next question.
- Answer each question concisely and briefly; be careful about long answers.
- Check to see if you've answered the question.
- Acknowledge when you get new insights or perspectives from a conversation.

Listening to complaints:

- Let the other person talk and just listen.
- Make sure you are clear.
- Check for more. Ask, "anything else?"

Responding to complaints:

- Ask them if they have a request.
- Pause and consider how you'd like to respond.
- Answer the request.
- Check and see where they are.
- Thank them for bringing the concern to you.

Keep these things in mind when people come to you:

- Take care of the person who is complaining.
- Just listen and get clear about the situation.
- Make a thoughtful response.
- Be the kind of person who is great to talk to.