

The Gift of Complaints

by Jon Craighead

I don't know anyone who enjoys hearing complaints about their work or their company, particularly when you have done everything you know to turn out a good product or serve your customer as best you could. The question could easily be, What will it take to have people be satisfied? I suggest that the best way to answer this question is to listen to people's complaints.

First, there must be the appreciation that someone would take the time to express dissatisfaction while fully aware there's the likelihood of a resulting upset. Such action takes a lot of courage; it is much easier for a customer simply to suffer quietly and leave your services – and then share their dissatisfaction with others. When this happens (which it often does), as the business owner you are completely unable to put in the correction or, at the very least, heal the relationship.

Secondly and equally important, you now have useful feedback to know first hand what's working or not working. You also have the opportunity to fully acknowledge the courage and interest that has been expressed by the unhappy customer directly and to express your commitment to make things right. This sort of action has the potential to contribute to the success of your business and build customer advocacy. Some companies are known and appreciated for their focus on completely satisfying customer complaints irrespective of revenue loss. The leaders of those companies appreciate that, as business owners, one of their primary objectives is sustaining a reputation for excellence, service, and customer satisfaction. To leave a customer in a state of frustration and discontent completely undermines your purpose.

In a February 2010 University of Pennsylvania Wharton Business School poll that asked business leaders, "What business enrichment goals are most important to you today," thirty-two percent of respondents said, "Improving business relationships." To haggle for money instead of looking for a resolution to an unhappy customer's concern is foolhardy and a sure way to damage the reputation of your enterprise. It can take an unlimited amount of capital and time to restore your good name, and in the end there is no assurance you will recover the good will that was lost.

In her book [Mindset – The New Psychology of Success](#), Professor Carol Dweck of Stanford University distinguishes the differences of a fixed-mindset and a growth-mindset. The relevancy to the complaint conversation is that often when someone is confronted, as with a complaint, a fixed-mindset individual goes on the defensive rather than listening to the complainer. The fixed-mindset person has limited ability to clearly

see what the situation is, to learn from it, and put in the correction. Often they are committed to proving how right or smart they are rather than tuning in to the problem. The significance of taking this position goes well beyond the immediate issue at hand: the more damaging impact is the inability to learn from mistakes and move forward. The missed opportunity to correct a process that could have a negative impact on the success of the business is one of enormous consequence.

Conversely, growth-mindset individuals have a natural proclivity for learning and are generally more interested in fixing the problem than in defending themselves. They see a complaint as an opportunity for expansion and problem solving. The resulting benefits are clear: the customer's complaint is directly addressed, and the customer leaves the conversation acknowledged for the courage it took to make the complaint and, most importantly, knowing that it made a difference.

Dr. Dweck concludes that changing from a fixed mindset to a growth mindset can be tough; however, she adds that she never heard anyone who has made the change say it wasn't worth it. And while there is no claim that changing one's mindset will solve all one's problems, those who make the change report their relationships are enhanced when the overriding and often unconscious competitiveness is removed. People simply enjoy being with them.

As leaders we are privileged to lead, and with that privilege comes the responsibility to lead our workforce to the next level of competency. This is best accomplished by example. Just imagine a company where all personnel are eagerly focused on customer satisfaction, creating a bedrock of innovation and good will. The world we live in today provides many purchasing choices for our customers, such as an unlimited number of vendors, discount associations, and the internet. When we have the good fortune to serve our clients we are provided a precious opportunity, making it senseless not to make every effort to serve them well. A good question to ask ourselves is: Why should anyone buy from us?

When someone brings me a complaint, I can blow them off, or I can deal with them graciously and effectively. And if doing that helps to create a customer for life, I say let the complaints roll in!