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Reprinted from

Harvard
Business Review

May-June 1984

No. 84311

Harvard Business Review

May-June 1984

Volume 62, Number 3

The Harvard Business Review, a bimonthly journal for professional managers, is a program in executive education of the Graduate School of Business Administration, Harvard University (John H. McArthur, Dean; Derek C. Bok, President).

Editorial offices, Boston, MA 02163.
Second-class postage paid at Boston, MA and at additional mailing offices; postmaster: send address changes to Harvard Business Review, Boston, MA 02163.

Are you hearing enough employee concerns?

If you're not providing alternatives, nonunion employees are probably finding unconstructive solutions to their problems at work

Mary P. Rowe and Michael Baker

It looks like there's no solution. A supervisor unjustly gives a poor performance rating and threatens a worker with termination. The employee feels he's been wrongly criticized but worries that if he goes over the supervisor's head to complain, he will lose in the final confrontation. He fears that personnel will listen only to the supervisor and he sees no way out. Ultimately, the situation becomes too much, and finally, in frustration the employee quits.

Not all employees are treated unjustly and not all supervisors are unjust, but in too many companies, the authors maintain, nonunion employees feel they have no safe, credible, and accessible route to take to have their concerns and complaints heard. The authors describe what nonunion employees go through when they don't have secure complaint channels and then discuss the structures and functions that best protect the rights of employees and managers while dealing with conflicts.

Ms. Rowe is a labor economist and is special assistant to the president of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. She has worked for 11 years as a full-time, in-house mediator and hears hundreds of concerns and complaints a year brought by nonunion employees. This is her third article in HBR, her last being "Dealing with Sexual Harassment," which appeared in our May-June 1981 issue. Mr. Baker is a social scientist and a research director for the Educational Fund for Individual Rights in New York City. He has extensive experience in organizational research and currently directs two projects on dispute resolution alternatives for nonunion employees. He serves as a vice president for Changing Workplaces, a business consulting firm.

☐ For what seemed ages, Mark Greenfield had been having arguments with a brilliant engineer, Cal Floren, in the successful product-development group Greenfield directed. As he cleaned up a week's worth of papers on his desk, Greenfield reflected on the difficulty he was having resolving tension in the lab. Cal Floren was creative and fit well with the research team, but he would become very angry about pressures – secrecy, keeping ahead of the competition, solving messy technical problems by next Saturday – that others accepted as part of the job. And it was getting worse. Recently, Cal had been suspicious and hostile about Mark's presenting the team's work to management. What had Cal meant when he said Mark was "stealing all the credit" and "that God knew all about it"? "Whom can I ask for advice?" thought Mark. "Can a manager go to personnel with a problem like this?"

As Greenfield answered the doorbell that Friday evening, he caught just a glimpse of the shotgun before it went off, spraying his face and shoulders with buckshot. He was never certain of his assailant's identity. The following year, Floren, who had quit the lab, was committed to a mental institution after fatally shooting his current boss on the golf course at point-blank range.

☐ Less than a year after joining a prestigious financial firm, Marcy Lowell is leaving. Along with her will go other women trainees, to each of whom the firm offered a settlement (Lowell received $25,000) in a belated effort to avoid costly EEO suits.

Marcy was the object of discrimination in job assignments and was the victim in several ugly instances of physical and verbal sexual harassment. On several occasions she was publicly demeaned by a supervisor using foul language. Her objective, low-key memos to her boss and to the human resources department received little attention and no written response. Her boss repeatedly postponed meetings to analyze her job assignments and to evaluate her performance. Her

supervisor continued to harass her. A fourth, eloquent letter—this time to the CEO—resulted in a perfunctory analysis of her concerns and the disclosure that records of her positive performance evaluations had been "lost."

Marcy's complaint was seen as an isolated problem until other staff women made their own considerable, personal complaints to the section head and to a vice president. These complaints covered issues of pay inequity, harassment, unfair assignments, unethical behavior by a supervisor, and also "lost" work performance records. Beyond the precarious legal situation in which the firm finds itself is the long trail of lost talent and low productivity since the women have banded together.

☐ At a major West Coast company one day, Dr. Zimmer found a technician unconscious from exposure to a toxic substance. Just a month or so before, fumes in a nearby lab had also made employees ill. For the second time, Zimmer, a shy person who found confrontation very difficult, talked to her boss, the new lab director. She pressed him to report the incidents to the company health and safety director, as required by company rules. Once again, she was told it was not her concern. Dr. Zimmer was both willing to be persistent and unwilling to go over her boss's head. Knowing no alternative, she tried repeatedly to force her boss to respect safety procedures and to see the foolhardiness of withholding information from senior management and state agencies. Within six months of the second incident, he fired her unceremoniously.

As a result of Zimmer's unjust-discharge suit against the company, management faces a full investigation in court of incidents and practices that it regards as "atypical" and "not representative of company philosophy."

In these true incidents, respectable companies and valued employees suffered unnecessary losses, and the work of entire units was disrupted for months. The real costs were, thus, far greater than the individual costs or legal settlements might suggest. Yet in each of these cases, the situation had developed slowly and the unpleasant outcome was avoidable. In these incidents, which are dramatic but not unrepresentative of many cases we've seen, either an aggrieved employee or a supervisor in need of assistance had nowhere to turn for effective help in settling a grievance within the company. For nonunion employees and managers, channels through which to express their concerns are a real necessity.

Harassment, inequities, safety problems, and real and imagined grievances are common in all work places. Though the sources of their frustration, irritation, and rage may differ depending on personal characteristics and position, managers, foremen, secretaries, professionals, and assembly-line workers all experience dissatisfactions. "Unconstructive" options for employees who have a problem or complaint far outnumber alternatives that management would see as constructive (see *Exhibit I*).

In this article we first describe the system for and attitudes of employees with complaints that exist in many companies. Then we go on to describe how corporations can handle such problems effectively by listening well and providing a set of constructive options for concerned managers and employees. This response is particularly important now when the boundaries between the rights and interests of nonunion employees and their employers are changing. Effective complaint systems can reduce the friction at these boundaries and foster employee satisfaction and productivity.

Drawbacks of the conventional approach

The majority of U.S. companies and institutions have no broad, explicit structures for dealing with employee concerns and no nonunion appeal channels other than the traditional chain of command. When they are unable to resolve disputes with their supervisors, employees at all levels are expected either to drop difficult problems or to take them up the line if they dare.

Managers in some companies claim that an "open door" policy exists, which suggests that it is possible to go over the boss's head or that the personnel department offers an alternative route. But most companies don't have the clear policies and supporting procedures necessary to make these additional routes a credible resource for a broad range of employees and problems. In particular, lower- and middle-level managers rarely feel free to complain on their own behalf or even to seek assistance in handling subordinates' complaints and problems. When companies do respond effectively through traditional arrangements, they must rely on an uncertain supply of supervisors and managers who can listen well and who have unusual tact and judgment.

In addition to the chain of command, most large companies have some kind of special channel for handling discrimination complaints. Conventional companies formally comply with the EEO laws and regulations that apply to them. Many managements tend, however, to see EEO complaints as springing from "isolated" problems and address them, like other grievances, in the manner that "chain of command" suggests—with swift, all-or-nothing decision making. This mode may end the immediate concern

Exhibit I **Ways employees may deal with a complaint**

Unconstructive options		Constructive options	
Doing nothing, bottling it up inside, being apathetic	Being rude to clients, gossiping maliciously and making trouble inside and outside of the company, openly or anonymously harassing supervisors or fellow employees, pursuing petty sabotage	Talking it over with trustworthy people, e.g., family, employee advisor, health care practitioner, or religious counselor	Talking directly with a supervisor or someone else in line management
Taking it out on family and friends	Being wasteful, stealing company secrets or other property, presenting fraudulent data, plagiarizing data	Redirecting frustration toward sports and other creative activities outside work	Working for orderly change with a responsible committee or "network" inside the company
Being absent or late frequently, taking long lunch hours, socializing extensively	Quitting without notice	Finding another position or project in an orderly manner, going back to school, working hard	Talking with the personnel department
Working slowly, adopting a "that's not in my job description" attitude, urging others not to work so hard	Polarizing union activities in and out of the company		Appealing to other designated complaint handlers such as hotline staff, harassment officer, ombudsman, or employee council members
Being depressed, weeping or making angry outbursts, suffering insomnia and being exhausted	Making precipitous or premature complaints to regulatory agencies, newspapers, or filing expensive lawsuits – while making little attempt to work things out or to change things inside the company		Appealing to the CEO or the company directors
Being sick, having accidents, taking drugs and drinking, suffering eating disorders	Consciously or unconsciously constructing "ambushes": setting up a colleague or oneself for serious mistakes or accidents on the job or project failure, pursuing major sabotage		Making an orderly exit
	Threatening violence, being violent		

but it may also prevent managers from seeing discrimination as a systemic problem that needs systemwide solutions. All-or-nothing decision making may also be inappropriate for discrimination complaints. Often such cases involve a conflict between two different cultural norms, and the company's best bet may be to create some third alternative to the two being presented.

Under traditional arrangements, because management is likely to define an employee's concern as an "accusation" and will see its mere exposure as "causing conflict," employees often find it difficult just to make an inquiry or to explore informally the dimensions of a problem. Even where model complaint and appeal systems for nonunion employees exist, an emphasis on adjudication can produce polarization that both employees and managers find unpalatable.

To design a more effective approach for handling concerns and complaints, it is important to examine common reactions of employees and middle managers to the conventional approach we have been describing.

Fear of reprisal. Most people try to avoid conflict and shrink from bringing up problems. And most employees – support staff and managers alike – definitely do not want to take a complaint "up the chain" past their supervisor. They understand all too well the taboo against going over a boss's head and they acutely fear reprisal for doing so. For professionals, the fear may not be of immediate reprisal but rather of a deferred reckoning that would upset their careers years down the line.

In many companies these fears are well grounded. Many top executives encourage the "middle management macho" ethic and press supervisors to handle things on their own, thereby making them feel deeply undercut when employees' complaints go over or around them. Resistance and reprisal can grow also because the only real power many supervisors have lies in controlling both access to higher levels and the downward flow of information. The chain-of-command system may also prompt managers' fears that they will be punished for any decision found to be so bad that it is overturned.

These fears support the powerful tradition of exit as a solution. When they have an unresolvable dispute with a superior, many executives and other professionals believe it is better to get out than to risk a fight. And even in companies committed to low turnover, middle managers may pass this way of thinking down to subordinates, encouraging exit rather than dispute resolution.

The fear of retaliation also creates diffidence about going to a personnel office. Angry employees often view their problems in all-or-nothing terms, seeing first the supervisor and then the personnel officer as nothing but apologists for management. And because the personnel department keeps a formal file and an informal oral history about an employee, some workers are afraid to make their complaints known. They fear that if they talk to personnel, especially about personal but work-related problems – alcoholism, drugs, love affairs, harassment, divorce – they will suffer retribution.

Loyalty to the company. Employees who are loyal to their supervisors and work units – and most are – may want to express concerns but not "grievances." One technician we talked to said, "I really was worried about the fumes, but how would my team look if I complained?" Most employees do not want to be litigious and do not have the resources or the psychological orientation – or even the idea – to sue their company.

Many who do sue report feeling that they have no other option. Most instances of whistleblowing Baker has studied involved employees who were punished, repeatedly rebuffed, or fired for trying to raise an issue *inside* the company. Only when employees receive no support from inside do they take the matter to the courts. Because his or her loyalty "seems to count for nothing" with the company, by the time the suit goes to court the employee is enraged.

Privacy and personal control. The majority of employees want very much to guard their privacy and will do almost anything to avoid revealing certain kinds of problems to fellow workers. Moreover, many employees and managers strongly prefer to act on their own rather than turn to others for help. Most also prefer to resolve a dispute or a problem directly with their supervisors or fellow employees or subordinates. Many people, therefore, will not complain to a superior or to a personnel officer because they fear these people may be indiscreet or may take action on the complaint without permission.

Moreover, some employees mainly want to be heard at the top or seek information that they feel only top management has; these people may not want to go to a supervisor or to personnel. They believe they won't get what they want if they go through intermediaries.

Lack of skills in effective disputing. No matter what organizational level they are on, employees often lack the knowledge and skills necessary to handle a dispute on their own. If treated unfairly – especially in cases of sexual or racial harassment – many workers know (or believe) that they have too little evidence on their side and are reluctant to get into a "his word against mine" confrontation.

Conflict resolution is difficult also because many people expect much less than employers would find reasonable. And some others expect much more. "Employees-at-will" increasingly believe they are entitled to the full panoply of due process (although this is a term most people cannot define). When they first make a complaint they are surprised to learn the real implications of employment-at-will – that there are relatively few protections for nonunion employees – and, thereafter, they are too resentful to try again constructively.

Supervisors, especially those with little experience, also may have a very limited view of what constructive options are open to them as they attempt to handle a problem with a subordinate.

Belief that it is pointless. Employees at all levels often think that it's useless to complain about certain kinds of problems. Engineers, scientists, and medical specialists often are convinced that managers and personnel officers won't understand technical, safety, or public policy issues. Especially when they are worried about safety issues and ethical problems, managers in particular may feel they can't safely take their frustrations to others.

Problems with coworkers seem particularly hard to complain about. This is especially true if the problem appears bizarre – an office mate is exposing himself, an odd scientific colleague never speaks and naps under his desk, someone is interfering with an experiment – or is one that others might define as trivial, e.g., a close coworker smells, has a bad temper, or smokes.

In our experience, when better options seem not to be available, nearly everyone with a complaint considers using an unconstructive option. Because of the problems we've cited, both executives and employees sometimes even consciously prefer them. Recognizing the costs of not resolving employee complaints earlier and less painfully, many companies have begun to try more innovative approaches.

Accessible, safe & credible

We estimate that perhaps a third of U.S. employers have developed new complaint systems for employees and managers. The major impetus has been to make these systems accessible, safe, and credible. Nearly all these companies have developed innovative procedures for discrimination problems; some also

have counselors trained for sexual harassment concerns. Most have established some kind of multistep review system for employee appeals that introduces objective adjudicators. Perhaps 300 to 500 companies and as many colleges and universities have adopted a broad problem-solving approach to complaint handling in which a number of different channels are simultaneously available to employees (typical examples are included in *Exhibit II*).

Many employers have increased the *accessibility* of their systems by offering a number of choices for bringing concerns to light. So that people can readily find constructive options and can have backup options where any one route fails, redundant channels are necessary. Some options—hotlines, managers on the shop floor, ombuds offices—should be easy contact points for the employee. Other means—attitude surveys, jobholders' meetings, meetings with people up two levels—provide less immediate but also effective routes.

Companies increase accessibility for minorities and women by making sure that minority and female professionals are employed throughout the complaint channels, especially at senior levels, and by supporting and staying in contact with the informal as well as formal networks of minority and female employees. In similar fashion, it is important that other large populations in the work force—technical and nontechnical, older and younger workers—be represented among complaint handlers. Innovative complaint systems emphasize access for supervisors and managers so that they can seek advice on supervisory problems and have constructive options for coping with their own problems as employees. Accessibility can be greatly improved by establishing at least one general complaint channel open to all managers and workers regardless of their work location, pay classification, or specialty.

For employees, a *safe* complaint system is one that can provide anonymous or confidential access to responsible human resources professionals. Hotlines, confidential-question systems, employee relations counselors, and ombuds offices should operate with confidentiality and privacy as primary objectives. Confidential discussion of problems offers the employee a chance to plan an approach to resolving the matter or to drop it entirely. A discussion of this kind ensures that the employee has some control over the dispute resolution process.

A safe system encourages effective disputing and forbids reprisal against those raising responsible concerns. Building employees' belief in nonreprisal requires that top management make a serious commitment to preventing retaliation and that it frequently reaffirm its policy. Even so, company pronouncements of "no retaliation" are difficult to enforce. Some senior managers react to complaints with anger or even rage. And sometimes an untrained manager simply behaves in a way management would deplore. At one company a manager fired an employee for putting a suggestion in a suggestion box. (She sued the company and won.) Moreover, unless top management encourages effective disputing, emphasizes its commitment to effective dispute resolution, and works to create a climate where reprisals don't happen, coworkers will often retaliate against a person who voices a concern.

A complaint system that is safe for managers means that they can use it themselves; that their sensible decisions will be backed up; that unfortunate decisions can be reversed in a face-saving way (for example, the complaint handler helps the manager devise a new solution); and that reversal of a responsibly made decision will trigger no action against the manager who made it. Because a good complaint system affirms in whole or in part most managerial decisions and provides safe personnel advice for managers, and because employees who go around their supervisor will most often be helped to resolve the matter with that supervisor, most managers and supervisors who work within a good system come to like it. Indeed, in some systems, supervisors are encouraged to take issues up jointly with the subordinate who initially raised them, to a higher level, an ombuds office, or a special review committee.

Assurances of objective review of concerns and complaints by human resources offices or by other special review channels apart from the line of supervision, greatly enhance a system's *credibility* to employees. To increase objectivity further, a growing number of companies have designated in-house "neutrals," who are counselors, mediators, and sources of formal and informal recommendations. They may be referred to by such titles as work problems counselors or ombuds officers. A few systems allow for outside, nonunion arbitrators.

Where they have broad powers, designated in-house neutrals may investigate complaints, hear concerns, review processes and decisions, mediate among warring parties, and make oral and written recommendations to line management. With very few exceptions, however, they are not arbitrators; they cannot reverse management decisions. They are interpreters among different viewpoints but do not make or change the rules. Typically, an ombudsman can receive complaints from any employee but does not formally review the decisions of other top managers who report to the CEO. Usually enjoying very wide latitude in making an investigation, a neutral can talk with anyone at any level.

The philosophy behind a neutral office is that the long-run interests of the company are congruent with those of a wronged employee, and that the employer may share a partial common interest with each of two employees (for example, supervisor and

Exhibit II **Typical structures and functions in complaint systems**

Functions	Communication with individuals (may be on a confidential basis)	Counseling with individuals (may be on a confidential basis)	Investigation, conciliation, and mediation	Adjudication	Upward feedback: management information*
Typical structures					
Line supervision	●	●	●	●	●
Personnel/human resources/employee relations	●	●	●	●	●
Multistep appeal systems			●	●	●
Equal opportunity counselors	●	●	●		●
Open-door investigators	●	●	●		●
Ombuds practitioners	●	●	●		●
Work problems counselors	●	●	●		●
In-plant counselors	●	●	●		●
Communications managers	●	●	●		●
Employee coordinators	●	●	●		●
Employee councils					●
Advisory boards					●
Suggestion-processing committees	●				●
Standing working groups			●		●
Jobholders' meetings	●				●
Skip level meetings	●				●
Managers out on plant floor	●		●	●	
Question lines (telephone)	●				●
Question boxes	●				●
Question columns in in-house publications	●				●
Attitude surveys					●
Employee audits					●
Employee assistance		●			●
Employee networks	●	●			●
Health and safety committees			●		●
Mentoring systems	●	●			
Nursing and medical offices		●			●
Performance appraisal systems	●	●			●
Policy advisory committees					●
Quality circles					●
Product safety and liability committees					●

*Data usually offered in the aggregate to protect confidentiality and privacy.

subordinate) who disagree with each other. This viewpoint is very different from the assumption embedded both in traditional labor-management relations and in the U.S. court system, where disputing parties are seen as adversaries.

Employees see a credible complaint system as responsive. They believe that when they bring concerns forward, management will sometimes change its decisions, in whole or in part. To ensure that the system stays responsive, multiple complaint channels serve as checks and balances for each other.

When management changes from the conventional chain-of-command approach to an innovative, nonunion complaint system, there are often associated changes in language, from "backing up the chain of command" to "supporting and training line supervision," from "preventing dissent" to "effective disputing," from "make-it-stick decision making" to "problem solving," from the idea that "accusations are disloyal" to the ethos that "loyalty requires responsible discussion." To effect this change, management needs new structures with new functions.

Five functions

Although adjudication will always be a necessary function in an effective complaint system, it takes a back seat to problem solving. Face-to-face communication, confidential counseling with individuals, mediation, and improved management information are more salient characteristics of the new systems approach to handling complaints.

1 Personal communication

The commonest need of employees who request assistance is for information. Ways to defuse rumors, clarify policy, and provide accurate information to employees who have misunderstood a work situation are basic to a complaint system.

Supervisors out on the floor, responsible employee networks, and sensitive human resources professionals may perform this function. In many cases it is important to provide ways for employees to request information anonymously or confidentially.

Under names such as "Open Line," "Speak Up," and "Your Voice," the newer approaches use phones or letters to answer general questions about company policy or procedure. Some channels will also get management's opinion on any personal or work place issue, providing anonymity or confidentiality to the inquiring employee. One such hotline defused potentially damaging rumors about the closing of branch offices. Another handled dozens of calls about an obscure change in benefits that many employees wrongly thought would wipe out an existing benefit.

2 Confidential advice & counseling

Counseling can help address employees' lack of skill and lack of faith in responsible dispute resolution. One of the least dramatic but most effective things that employee counselors accomplish is to help both managers and employees see a problem in perspective, to frame and present it effectively, and to show them what options they have within the organization for resolving it. Most frequently the confidential counselor succeeds by helping a visitor resolve a problem on his or her own. Companies that take an innovative approach to complaint handling for nonunion employees are beginning to allow or encourage some confidential discussion of employee problems by supervisors as well as by personnel staff.

Helpful advice can also come to employees from fellow participants in a formal or informal network and from mentors, if a mentoring system is in place. Employee assistance and health care professionals sometimes extend their mandate to counsel effectively about work problems.

Innovative structures (the professional counselors at NBC, the employee relations managers at Digital Equipment, the resident managers at IBM, and other corporate ombuds offices) usually concentrate on performing this advice function well. One work problems counselor spent many hours with a manager who felt he was racially harassed by his boss. The manager ultimately wrote and delivered a responsible letter asking the boss to desist. The boss did stop and subsequently promoted the manager.

Confidential complaint channels can also help management deal with individual problems in a general way, at no cost to anyone's privacy or individual rights. Mentioning no names, an ombudsman alerted a department head to an allegation of sexual harassment. The department head raised the subject of harassment in a "routine" but thorough way at the next staff meeting. The offending behavior ceased.

3 Investigation, conciliation & mediation

A modern and creative approach to handling employee complaints stresses dispute resolution rather than adjudication. Many companies have procedures to investigate and mediate employee complaints in a far less polarized and formal manner than companies usually follow in unionized settings or when outside agencies are involved. The employee has to give permission for the investigation, which should be conducted on a low-key basis to protect everyone's privacy as well as the company's image.

Open-door investigators, sexual harassment and other EEO officers, employee relations managers, and designated neutrals (the ombudsman at AT&T Information Systems, the personnel communications director at Anheuser-Busch, the mediators

at Carleton College and at various small businesses) are often able to resolve problems through fact finding and mediation. At one company, dozens of nonsmoking high-tech employees threatened to quit when management introduced a group of smokers into their work space. The employee relations manager investigated and changed air flows, altered desk patterns, and designated smoking and nonsmoking bathrooms. No one quit.

In many companies with such structures, ad hoc mechanisms such as a committee of inquiry, a small group of professional peers, or an appointed investigator known to have relevant expertise mediate disputes among professional and technical employees. An equipment expert came into one publications division, for example, to help resolve a flaming dispute about the choice of highly specialized equipment. Mediating between two angry managers in the division, the expert got them to agree to a two-year plan for phasing in what each wanted.

4 Adjudication

Many companies have designed formal complaint and appeal channels for adjudication of complaints. Some are multistep systems designed to serve nonunion employees in unionized environments. As a result, they resemble traditional grievance systems in the scope and structure of their operations. A few such systems involve some form of binding arbitration that includes a neutral party from outside the company as a last step. This feature is said to be a critical aspect of the credibility and effectiveness of employee complaint procedures at companies such as American Electric Power, American Airlines, and TWA.

At Northrop's aviation division, full-time nonexempt employees may press complaints about the application of company policy through a formal grievance system. The steps include going through one's supervisor, the employee relations department, a management appeals committee, and binding arbitration.

Other companies have created alternatives to the union grievance model. At NBC appeals go to a high-level management panel. Security Pacific National Bank created a three-step grievance procedure, with final appeal to a member of the management committee. Some managements – for example, at the Cleveland Clinic and at the First Bank of Oregon, for discrimination complaints – believe that to be credible in their response to employee complaints, they must involve officers and staff who are not in the employee's line of supervision.

Finally, some companies will try to continue a mediation approach until the very last moment. At Control Data, for instance, 80% of the cases about to go to final appeal through the peer review committees have been mediated successfully by an ombudsman.

5 Upward feedback

Many companies have designed specific structures to provide management with ways of finding out about concerns and complaints. Such companies use employee surveys, advisory councils, and formal and informal employee audits to stay alert to emerging problems. Many other structures can also contribute data. Quality circles can illuminate the employee relations issues that are often at the core of "technical" problems. Health and safety committees (developed voluntarily or by law, as in Washington) can identify supervisors or employees whose behavior poses a special risk. Mentoring arrangements provide a good ear and savvy advice on how the junior employee should approach a problem encountered on the job; a summary of these problems is useful to management. Employee networks can help management understand the problems of special groups.

Performance appraisal systems that involve more than occasional conferences and higher-level review of decisions provide both opportunities and incentives for employee and supervisor to work problems out constructively; management should review summaries of these problems. Research, development, and product-liability review committees are sometimes forums in which professional employees can raise legal, ethical, or professional issues. And nursing and medical offices can sometimes identify personal and work-related problems that underlie the health complaints troubled employees present. It is important that these secondary complaint-handling channels report aggregated data regularly to top management.

Some open-door ombuds officers and investigators – for instance, the personnel communications director at Anheuser-Busch – are charged to bring policy-relevant data back to line management in a way that protects the confidentiality of employees. To monitor for retaliation attempts and to locate trouble spots, IBM, Security Pacific, and Control Data carefully compile statistics on employee complaints.

With good confidential complaint systems in place, top management can head off serious problems. A telephone complaint counselor in a large manufacturing company got an anonymous message: "You guys should check the waste disposal records from the TDR facility!" The ensuing investigation enabled the health and safety director to avert environmental damage and, most likely, heavy government fines.

The systems approach

Many companies – large and small – work hard to provide all five functions effectively in a

coherent complaint-handling system. At Security Pacific one sees the following mix of approaches: the line of supervision; a telephone hotline for fielding employee questions and channeling problems; a personnel system; a confidential question-response office that answers questions and provides advice on how to proceed without revealing the employee's identity to management or to personnel staff; and a formal complaint procedure. At Control Data, the broad approach to problem solving is reflected in the presence of both telephone and personal access to professional, personal, and work counselors; a four-step complaint procedure ending with peer review committees; and a special channel for discrimination complaints.

These approaches illustrate the fact that specific structures and job titles within systems will vary (see *Exhibit II*), but all five functions previously discussed should be well represented for an innovative system to work. We believe multifaceted systems offer the best chance for supporting nonunion employees and for managers to find constructive options for problem solving. No system will be free of injustice, complaints, and concerns, but some can teach and exemplify effective dispute resolution.

How might the stories at the beginning of this article have turned out if the companies had had better complaint-handling procedures in place?

☐ Mark Greenfield reflected on advice given at the group leaders' meeting: "If you have any unusual problems, talk them over with an older group leader or with the employee communications manager sooner rather than later. Remember, you can always go in off the record." Half an hour later he was referred by employee communications to the employee assistance office. From there he returned to Cal Floren and laid out his concerns quietly but firmly. He told Floren that the ugly outbursts must stop and that if after today's discussion Cal still felt Mark was unfair, he should take the matter up the line or to employee communications. If he wanted to talk about being upset, Cal could seek out the employee assistance office.

Cal glared, stony-faced, and stalked out. A one-sentence resignation awaited Mark the following Monday. The young group leader felt very troubled about the loss of a pivotal team member and again sought out the employee communications manager. Several days later, the manager told Mark she had heard that Cal had been hospitalized "for a nervous breakdown."

☐ Marcy Lowell looked at the notice on the bulletin board: "Got a problem? Work problems counselors are at 495-HELP." Her call during lunch break started a long chain of events: almost a dozen talks with a counselor; a personal letter to the supervisor, which stopped his offensive language and behavior; a long discussion with her boss about work assignments, which resulted in more responsibility; and several tough months when Marcy faced her own shortcomings in order to do better. Discussions with the work problems counselor and her boss helped both Marcy and her boss understand how she was going to get (and to be able to hear) the supportive criticism she needed. The year ended with a substantial bonus.

Somewhat later, Marcy found herself talking toughly at the staff women's luncheon in favor of performance appraisals. She laughed at herself inwardly. Maybe *she* was on her way toward management. But should she have listened more carefully to her colleague's complaint about pay inequity? Marcy phoned Harriet to recommend 495-HELP.

☐ In her methodical scientific way, Dr. Zimmer leafed through the employee handbook, "Safety concerns... Talk with your supervisor or see the health and safety director." She'd tried her supervisor; she didn't want to go over his head to the safety office. The cover of the handbook mentioned the ombudsman as another option. "If you don't know where to go, try us!" Zimmer went in as "Ms. X" to discuss her concern. The ombudsman took a sober view, saying, "How can we ignore this?"

He encouraged Zimmer to write a detailed and carefully worded letter to her boss, which she then took in to him personally. She sent no photocopies. He blew up and fired her. Zimmer had been helped to prepare for his anger, but not for a firing. She returned immediately to the ombudsman. The ensuing investigation resulted in Zimmer's return to her bench. Her boss was transferred and subsequently left to start his own company.

Related reading

Michael A. Baker, "Can Corporate Engineers Speak Out?" *The Chemist*, January 1984.

Ronald E. Berenbeim, *Nonunion Complaint Systems: A Corporate Appraisal*, (New York: The Conference Board, 1980).

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Mary P. Rowe, "Dealing with Sexual Harassment," HBR May-June 1981, p. 42.

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