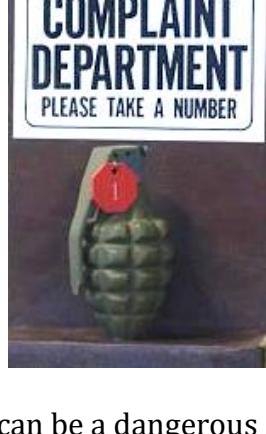


The Danger of Allowing "Confidential Complaints"

My fellow EOS implementer, Ken Dewitt sent this to me. This is the EOS solution to a common issue that owners and leaders face.

Gene



What do you say when one of your team members asks you to keep something confidential? There's a dangerous workplace situation that all leaders and managers find themselves drawn into from time to time. I call it the "confidential complaint" trap.

This happens to me when I'm working with leadership teams. Someone will stop me in the hall during a break and say, "May I talk to you for a minute, NOT in the room with the group?"

There's a natural inclination to say yes to this kind of request. As leaders, we all want to be approachable. We may also want to find out what's going on inside our organization. But promising blanket confidentiality for run-of-the-mill complaints

can be a dangerous slope because it is diametrically opposed to creating a healthy workplace culture.

Naturally, if you have a feeling the person asking is about to report something serious and extraordinary, like sexual harassment, you should handle that situation with the appropriate level of confidentiality. But if the person just wants to make a general complaint about something a co-worker is doing, you can't really afford to say yes.

Making this promise ties your hands

Promising confidentiality puts a leader in the sorry position of knowing about something that needs to change in the company, but not really being able to do anything about it. Approaching a manager, saying someone complained, and then keeping that someone secret undermines the relationship between the leader and the manager, driving further dysfunction into the company. It's a vicious cycle.

It's better to help the complainant understand why, for the good of the company, you cannot promise confidentiality. If you have to keep the complaint under wraps, how can you help them go directly to root cause of the problem and work to solve it in an effective way?

I answer such requests as a coach by saying, "Well, sure, as long as we understand that after you tell me what you have to say, we'll have a decision to make: when we go back into the room, am I going to tell them, or are you?"

Then I continue, "I'm here for the good of the company. If you've got something to say, let's find the courage to bring it up in the room. I'll help you introduce it and facilitate the conversation." This clearly communicates that I'm approachable, but I'm not willing to sweep issues under the rug. The healthy thing to do is to address it openly, not by secret complaint. You can't solve a problem you can't talk about.

Confidential complaints kill culture

In his article, "[The jerk Factor](#)" Patrick Lencioni talks about different kinds of jerks. There are "Big J Jerks" who are brutal and harsh and hard to deal with. People who rant and rave, even if well intentioned with the company's best interests in mind, damage the company because they scare other people into silence or into lodging a "confidential complaint."

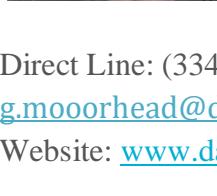
But Lencioni also points out that "Little j jerks" are just as damaging to a company. They are the ones who see bad behavior, poor performance, or something damaging to the company, and want to spare themselves the pain of dealing with it openly. Certainly, they might be motivated by fear of reprisal or retribution, but that is also unhealthy as it allows other problems to go on unaddressed.

In EOS, we teach that the "open, honest and vulnerable" approach is essential in creating the culture of trust necessary to achieve great visions. Allowing confidential complaints gives people the permission NOT to be that way, and totally undercuts the culture of openness. We must build a culture where people know it is safe to call out issues. That's the only way we can identify the root cause, discuss it in a healthy way, and then solve it. That's the kind of culture that achieves a great Vision that is shared by everyone.

Keep Moving!

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Helping organizations clarify, simplify and achieve their vision.