

SKILLS NEEDED BY A COMPLAINT HANDLER

Skills Needed by a Complaint Handler and Functions and Characteristics Required in a Good Complaint System

A good complaint system will provide multiple options for complainants, and as much choice as possible among those options. The first three functions of the system will be available on a confidential basis if desired. The system will have men and women, minorities and non-minorities, available as complaint-handlers. The system will be available to everyone within the workplace, including managers, trainees, employees, etc., and will accept any kind of concern. Necessary functions include:

- Expressing respect for feelings, especially rage, fear of retaliation and grief. Helping people deal with their feelings so they will be able to make good decisions and be able to deal effectively with their problems or complaints;
- Giving and receiving information on a one-to-one basis;
- Helping people help themselves: confidential counselling with clients, inventing options, listing possible options for the choice of the client, coaching on how the client or group may deal with the problem directly (problem-solving, role-playing, anticipating possible outcomes, etc.);
- Shuttle diplomacy by a third party, back and forth among those with a problem, to resolve the matter at hand, (sometimes called "conciliation" or "caucusing" or as one form of "mediation");
- Mediation: having a third party bring together the people with a problem, so they reach their own settlement or are helped by a third party to reach their own settlement; the settlements of mediation may be formal or informal;
- Fact-finding or investigation: this may be done either formally or informally; results may be used or reports made either with or without recommendations from the fact-finder to a decision-maker;
- Decision-making, arbitration or adjudication: where a person or body with power and/or formal authority decides a dispute; this may be structured as (part of) a formal complaint-and-appeals channel or formal grievance procedure;
- Systems change: designing a generic address to a problem or complaint; "upward feedback"; actual change in policies, procedures or structures as a result of inquiry, suggestion, complaint or grievance.

Within organizations, where all these functions are being performed, one may speak of a complaint-handling system. Without fair, accessible complaint-and-appeals channels, other functions are not likely to work well. Where all functions are working well, the formal grievance channel is not likely to be used heavily. By analogy, a manager who is not able to decide disputes fairly will not be much trusted in carrying out other functions of a complaint handler. And the manager who has all these skills will usually be able to solve most problems without much "arbitrating of disputes."

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