

## *With All Due Respect...*

### *How to Communicate Suggestions and Complaints to Your Boss*

by

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When you hear the word “dissent,” you may have images come to mind of employees rising up against their bosses or of an employee who constantly complains or gripes about things that seem OK to everyone else in the workplace. However, in academic terms, organizational dissent is broader than either of those two pictures. Dissent includes solutions to problems, ideas about how to serve customers or clients better, questions about unethical practices, and other actions that businesses need to be effective. This white paper is written to employees wanting to share their ideas with others in the workplace but who may not know how to do so successfully. It is also written to managers and supervisors who want to hear ideas from employees and want to train their employees to communicate more effectively. The next several paragraphs describe dissent. We follow that with a discussion of how dissenters can increase their chances of success based on a number of recent studies.

The academic definition of dissent describes interactions where an employee (or volunteer in a nonprofit organization) questions a policy or practice in his or her organization.<sup>1</sup> Another way to think about dissent is that an employee believes something that is different from

what he or she thinks a supervisor or upper management believes.<sup>2</sup> Think about the employee at Enron who questioned the unethical accounting practices. Before that person “blew the whistle,” she tried internal channels to get someone to pay attention to this issue<sup>3</sup>. That communication along internal lines was dissent.<sup>4</sup> Sometimes dissent can take the form of a complaint, but it is just as often focused on questioning something or suggesting solutions to problems.<sup>5</sup> Consider the receptionist who has ideas about client flow that could help a medical practice operate more efficiently. These are examples of dissent. Dissent also includes employees who bring up issues that are of importance to them personally such as “I don’t like our policy of working on the weekends” or employees who note interpersonal difficulties like “my supervisor does not treat me with respect.”<sup>6</sup> Dissent wouldn’t include coworker conflict or complaints about customers. Coworker conflicts generally don’t involve a situation where an employee differs in opinion from a supervisor or management. Complaints about customers are usually not focused on questioning organizational policies or practices.

The point of understanding how to define dissent is to show that there’s a difference between the first thing that comes to our minds when we hear the word “dissent” and the way that academic research defines dissent. This white paper uses the academic definition where dissent is broader than just complaining. When you look at dissent from this perspective, there are a lot of benefits of dissent for organizations and for employees. Organizations that welcome dissenting opinions tend to make better decisions than those organizations that shut down dissenters.<sup>7</sup> That’s because dissent helps decision makers to consider a larger range of options before making decisions. This type of critical thinking helps decision making even when those alternatives are completely unworkable.<sup>8</sup> Encouraging dissent tends to make organizations more innovative, again because dissenters bring new ideas and perspectives to decision making.

Providing opportunities for employees to disagree increases employees' performance<sup>9</sup> and reduces turnover as well<sup>10</sup>. For employees, being able to express dissent has been linked to increased job satisfaction<sup>11</sup> and decreased burnout<sup>12</sup>. Employees tend to see their workplaces as fairer when they can express their opinions.<sup>13</sup>

With those benefits, you'd think that all organizations would be open to dissent. We all want to be open and probably most of us consider ourselves at least somewhat open to others' ideas. But employees may not perceive their supervisors to be as open as they think they are. In fact, while open door policies tend to be fairly common, it is also common for them to be abused.<sup>14</sup> A supervisor may claim to have an open door policy, but when an employee challenges that supervisor's pet project or a policy that the supervisor doesn't want to change, the open door is either slammed shut or it leads to an open window. It doesn't take long for employees to realize that the door isn't really open<sup>15</sup>. In fact, when organizational leaders were interviewed in one study, 50% of them explicitly described being open to employee dissent.<sup>16</sup> But for those leaders, the first example of employee feedback or suggestions that came to mind was one that they rejected or said "no" in response. Some could not think of any employee ideas that had been implemented or had been positively received. This is a paradox where a leader claims to have an open door policy but doesn't really want anyone to challenge his or her ideas.

That paradox is what makes dissent risky, despite the benefits. Fear of being ostracized, rejected, or punished are some of the biggest reasons why employees are silent and don't speak up when they have good ideas.<sup>17</sup> Feeling like dissent is useless is another major cause of withholding dissent.<sup>18</sup> But that silence costs organizations a competitive edge and costs employees satisfaction and peace of mind from being heard. This white paper describes some strategies that might increase the chances of an employee being successful in expressing dissent.

Now just to be clear—if you are communicating your ideas to your boss, there are a number of elements that are important in determining whether you’ll be successful. In writing this white paper, we don’t talk about how open your organization is to different ideas or what kind of relationship you have with your supervisor, and both of those factors influence the dissent process<sup>19</sup>. We also don’t focus on the issue that triggers the dissent. Those factors make important differences in whether dissent is successful. But how you say what you say is also important and that is our focus. The remainder of this paper describes tactics that will likely increase the chances that employees expressing dissent will be successful. These ideas are based primarily on four research studies that were conducted examining employees’ and supervisors’ perspectives of dissent using a variety of survey and interview methods.<sup>20</sup>

### **Solution presentation**

One of the most important tactics associated with successful dissent is providing a solution to a problem. Employees and supervisors reported that presenting a solution to a problem, rather than just commenting on the problem itself, is much more likely to be effective and more likely to be seen as communicating appropriately. There are probably at least two reasons for this. The biggest reason that presenting a solution is better than just describing a problem is that someone who describes problems is seen negatively. That person might be seen as a complainer or griper. Presenting a solution to the problem avoids the undesirable baggage that someone who only points out a problem could experience. The second reason solution presentations tend to be effective is that it reduces the amount of cognitive effort required to say “yes” to a dissenter’s idea. If an employee describes a problem, it would then be up to the hearer to develop a solution.

*“Let’s talk about being solution driven, rather than problem driven.”*

On the other hand, if an employee presents a solution to a problem, it saves the supervisor or coworker the time and energy of thinking of a solution themselves.

There's an important caveat that needs to be added here. In studies examining dissenters' perspectives, dissenters believe that they use solution presentation more often than any other tactic to express dissent. However, in studies examining supervisors' perspectives, supervisors see solution presentation as only occasionally used. Instead, supervisors saw venting as the most common way of dissenting and logically describing a problem (but not a solution) as the second most frequent tactic. The takeaway from these results is that if you think you are really good at presenting solutions to problems, you need to ask yourself if others would see you that way. We all have a more positive view of ourselves than may be appropriate. When you are about to express dissent, honestly examine whether you are presenting a solution to a problem or only describing the problem. You are more likely to be effective if you focus on solutions.

### **Rational Appeals Rather than Emotional Venting**

Dissent is an emotional experience. You may be frustrated at a problem or angry over a lack of response to that problem in the past. We often assume people push their emotions aside when they go to work—the term for that is “rational bias.” That is to say that people expect others to be rational rather than emotional. The problem is that expectation does not reflect reality—we are emotional beings.<sup>21</sup> Nevertheless, it seems that supervisors are more willing to listen to dissenters who put aside their emotions as they disagree with organizational policies or practices. In studies examining supervisors' perspectives and dissenters' perspectives, both groups acknowledged that direct-factual appeals were more likely to be associated with effective dissent. Direct factual appeals include supporting information that demonstrates critical thinking

and rational analysis. Rational messages are more persuasive because of the assumption that organizations are rational places. When you express dissent, be careful about just venting your emotions, especially to supervisors. If you are caught up in the heat of a frustrating experience, take a few minutes to think through the issue before expressing dissent. Stifling your emotions isn't right—in a perfect world, you could be honest about what you are feeling. However, your workplace isn't a perfect world, and you're more likely to be effective if you are rational and calm.

Even though venting is less likely to be successful than direct-factual appeals, there are emotional appeals that may prove effective. Specially, thinking about people's values in your organization can be an important advantage. In a nonprofit organization, consider how your dissent fits with the mission and with serving the organization's clients. In a for profit company, how will your dissent help the company be more profitable? It could be that the focus of your dissent is a change in mission or direction for the company so appealing to the current mission may not be ideal. If that is the case, what are other values where your dissent might resonate? Remember also that individuals have values that may or may not correspond with their organization's overarching goals. If your supervisor's goal is a quick promotion, how can your dissent help him or her to achieve that promotion? Venting is unlikely to be an effective strategy for expressing dissent. Appealing to people's values may not guarantee success, but such a strategy may help to make the dissent less risky—even if you don't accomplish change, you may be less likely to get into trouble for expressing your opinion.

*"I'm willing to hear it...but it all has to be oriented towards the same goal."*

## Choosing the Right Audience

Presenting solutions and rational arguments is not the only part of successfully expressing dissent. Another important element is the person to whom you communicate. Simply put, for dissent to change the situation, it must be expressed to someone who can do something about the problem. In many cases, this might be your supervisor, and previous research has demonstrated that dissent expressed to supervisors is more likely to be perceived positively than dissent expressed to coworkers.<sup>22</sup> However, not all supervisors are able to address all problems. When supervisors were asked what differentiated effective dissent from ineffective dissent, they responded that the issue must be one that the supervisor has the authority to change. If your supervisor is not top management, think about two things. First, what is your goal in expressing disagreement with a policy or practice? If it is to feel better or to know that someone heard you, then your supervisor may be an ideal audience. If your goal is to accomplish change, then ask yourself a second question: is this an issue over which my supervisor has control? If it is a policy that comes from top management, your supervisor may or may not be able to effect change. He or she may be hesitant to voice your concerns to people higher in the organization because of the risks associated with dissent—you were willing to deal with those risks but your supervisor may not be.

Generally speaking, coworkers may be great audiences for dissent if you want someone who understands your frustration (but even then you want to be careful how you voice your dissent—you don't want to be labeled a whiner). Though, it is rare that lateral dissent is able to accomplish any kind of change, dissenting to coworkers may build a coalition around your position, and there is strength in numbers. Dissenting to coworkers could also help you get everything straight in your mind and form the basis for a future conversation with your

supervisor. However, coworkers are usually not in positions to help you address whatever situation is triggering your dissent.

### **Pressure tactics**

Pressure tactics are hard appeals that are hostile and aggressive in nature. This could be an ultimatum like threatening to resign or some other type of demand. These may often include

*“I don’t think ultimatums ever work well because you’ll get called on your bluff.”*

raised voices, insults, and/or flared tempers. A pressure tactic might include a threat (veiled or direct) to slow down or sabotage work if the situation is not resolved to the dissenter’s liking. Sometimes, it can feel like a dramatic action is the only thing that can accomplish change. The problem is that

everyone is replaceable. It is not surprising that these tactics are seen as highly inappropriate by supervisors. If the pressure tactic works in this instance, you may accomplish change, but your relationships with others will certainly suffer. It is probably only a matter of time until you need someone’s help, and that help may be tough to come by. Not only that, if the pressure tactic does not work and you have to back down, you will have lost credibility.

### **Summary and Conclusion**

Dissent has a number of benefits for organizations and for dissenters, but those benefits do not come without risk. This paper was written to demonstrate how employees could express dissent while reducing the risk. One of the most important elements of successful dissent is thinking in terms of solutions rather than just in terms of problems. Along with that, it is important to present rational arguments framed in terms of organizational values rather than just venting about something that you don’t like. Your choice of audience is important, and largely related to your goal in saying something. If you want to accomplish change, you need to express



dissent to someone who can do something about the issue. Finally, be careful with pressure tactics. They rarely work and often make your situation worse.

These tactics don't guarantee success. Make no mistake—questioning the status quo can stress your relationship with your supervisor and your coworkers. You may have a supervisor who is unwilling to listen. But dissent has a number of benefits for you and for your organization, and how you communicate disagreement has a great deal to do with the success or failure of your conversation. This report was written to give you tools to increase the chances that you can make a difference in your workplace.

### Notes

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