Several years ago, while facilitating a first-line manager development class, I encountered what I can only describe as a “whiner.” This lady whined about everything. She whined about the room where we had the training - the temperature, the lighting, and the seating arrangements. She whined about the food. She whined about the exercises we asked participants to do, and she whined about her co-workers and managers. By 2 p.m., this became highly irritating – not just to myself and my co-trainer, but also to the other participants. And this was only day one of a 6-day program. We felt lucky that we didn’t have to work with her every day.

Eventually my co-trainer Lesley, who was far more experienced than I, decided to tackle the situation head-on. At around 2:15 p.m., Lesley announced that the next exercise would be to discuss in small groups “how to deal with a whiner.” I can still remember the look on the whiner’s face, as she said: “Oh, this is about me, isn’t it?” Sniggers from the rest of the class confirmed what they were all thinking. Lesley simply smiled at the said whiner, and asked: “Who else deals with whiners at work, and what do we do about it as first-line managers?” The following discussion was instrumental in helping our whiner to identify her behavior and take the first step to change it.

Apparently, “whining” is an issue everywhere. There is even a nonprofit organization called “A Complaint Free World,” which has a mission and vision of promoting positive cooperation across the world.[1] This organization produces purple bracelets which people wear on one wrist. When people find themselves complaining, they have to switch the bracelet to the other wrist. The goal is to keep it on the same wrist for 21 days, which is the time it takes to form (or break) a habit. The whole idea is that not complaining can make a difference to how people feel about themselves, others, and the world. It reminds me a little of the “swear jar” concept, where people have to put money in the jar every time they swear.

Most of us whine at some point or another but when it becomes a part of the organizational culture, it can be destructive. It is obvious how a culture of non-complaining can make a difference to the workplace – people are more energized, there is better and more creative problem solving, better cooperation, and an overall more pleasant and positive working environment.

Unfortunately, while we can work on becoming a non-complainer ourselves, we can’t change someone else. Whiners have to want to stop whining before they can really do it. However, it is worth setting an example and seeing what an impact that can make. Don’t expect it to be easy, though. In an article in “Governing” magazine, Ken Miller[2] explains:

"For me, once I truly realized I needed a complaint-free life, I actually slipped one of those purple bracelets on my right wrist. Again, the goal was to go 21 days without complaining. Each time I complained I was supposed to switch the bracelet to my other wrist. By lunchtime I had nearly broken my bracelet."

However, several months later Ken did finally manage to break the habit of complaining and found himself a more positive and balanced person. Have you ever had the pleasure of knowing someone who doesn’t ever whine about anything? I have known one or two of those people in my life, and I have to say that they are among the most pleasant people I have ever met. They are positive, happy, well-balanced, and appear to take everything in their stride. When something happens that most of us would react to, they just smile and carry on. They have great perspective. I can only aspire to that!

Are you a whiner? What is the “whine culture” in your organization? Does it help or hinder the work you do on a daily basis?

As for me, I’m off to buy a purple bracelet.

[1] www.acomplaintfreeworld.org/
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