

Constructive criticism is safer

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Stress can often be relieved by grumbling, and I have sometimes cautiously encouraged this time-honoured method of getting grievances out of one's system, when constructive criticism has failed.

But in a year as hard as this, the scale of the grievances may give rise to a more strident form of grumbling that can lead to serious consequences. The obvious scenario is when workplace arguments rise to a higher pitch; people don't discuss the issues calmly and rationally, and what was debate turns to threats and insults.

Less-obvious is the effect on outside observers, who may pick up revealing signals from little snatches of angry dialogue that were meant to be private. At worst, this can imperil whole contracts - bringing it home to us that we all play our part in forming the image of the company, however unwittingly. In other words, attitude can be just as important outside the organisation as inside.

This was the subject of one of the most successful training films ever made, called *Who Killed the Sale?*, where a number of small dissatisfactions began to build up into a negative reputation. And I was reminded of it when I heard a story from my client Tariq, who works in a Gulf chemicals manufacturer.

Tariq managed a number of factories that manufactured hazardous chemicals, so he had a steady demand for heavyweight protective gloves.

The company that supplied these was being sold, so he went to visit another supplier. He was given a tour of the works, where everything seemed in good order, and he also noticed in passing that it was only a few blocks from his favourite sauna and Turkish baths.

A few days later, he went for a sauna, and while he was relaxing on the sunbed, he couldn't help overhearing the conversation in the next cubicle. As it got louder, he gathered that it was two executives complaining about one of their managers at work, who seemed to be called Raufal. That was the name of the manager who had shown him round the glove factory.

Presently it became clear that they were describing that very company, apparently making accusations of corrupt quality control. From what he could hear, Tariq thought it was possible that those gloves might not be proof against the corrosive chemicals with which his shop-floor employees worked.

Of course, he couldn't tell whether this was just malicious gossip, perhaps by low-performing employees. But it managed to leave a lingering doubt in his mind, and he decided not to take the negotiations any further.

That demonstrates how much impact you can make on your company's client-base, even though you feel that the new-business programme is not your department.

Even in a tough year, maybe you should try a bit harder with your constructive complaints before you fall back on grumbling.

Key points: Staying in control

- Grumbling may relieve stress when constructive complaints fail.
- Excessive public discontent may discourage potential clients.
- A corporate image can be fatally damaged by malicious rumours.

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