

How a Wise Leader Deals with a Disgruntled Employee

How to Respond to Employee Complaints in a Way That Boosts Trust, Morale, and Their Willingness to Be Honest in the Future

David Lee

A shorter version of this was published at EREMedia.com

I recently heard a story that illustrates what happens when a leader interacts with employees in such a way that employees feel safe enough to express their concerns—including those related to the leader’s management style—rather than remain silent, build resentment, and become disengaged.

It’s also a great example of what communicating concern, respect, and open-mindedness sounds like.

When Employees Don’t Feel Safe to Speak Up, Engagement Suffers

Knowing how to respond to employee feedback and complaints in a way that leaves them feeling heard and respected is one of THE most important skills for any leader to cultivate. That’s because the power differential between manager and employee, or senior leader and employees, makes

it difficult for all but the most assertive and vocal employees to speak up.

If employees don’t speak up, the leader will continue to do things that cause them to get far less productivity and initiative from their people. Without feedback, they will never hear about the Managerial Moments of Truth they are mishandling which lead to employee disengagement.

To prevent this from happening, wise leaders keep in mind this important question when talking with employees: “How can I respond in a way that makes it as comfortable as possible for this person to speak candidly with me?”

They also possess the skills to do this.

Here’s a story that illustrates how it’s done...

The Upset Employee and the Wise Leader

It's 8 PM on a Wednesday and Mike Royer, one of the managing principals of Berry Talbot Royer, receives a text from an employee, who we will call Tiffany. She wants to know if she can take Friday off. He's a bit surprised to receive the request at this time of day, especially since they were meeting the following morning.

"I did this intentionally because I thought it her responsibility to address this type of request to me in person, not via text, and I wanted to see if she would do it. I thought she used text to avoid the issue and somewhat set me up for an 'easy yes'. So I decided that if she wanted it she would have to ask me in person."

Tiffany does bring it up. Mike says she may have the day off, but then comments that she seems to take off a lot of Fridays. He says this because recently another employee had commented to him that Tiffany was frequently off or working from home on Friday afternoons.

The meeting moves on to other topics.

Tiffany leaves the meeting and does some research into how many days off she has taken. She emails Mike that evening saying that she had only taken off three Friday afternoons in the last three months. She also shares that she doesn't appreciate his questioning her commitment, which was how she interpreted his "...it does seem like you take a lot of Fridays off" comment.

Concerned about Tiffany's feelings and not wanting her to get the wrong message, Mike sends her the email below.

I asked Mike if I could include it in this article because it is such a stellar example of how a manager can:

- Show concern for an employee, and how they were affected by their interaction.
- Respond to an employee's inaccurate interpretation of their behavior without defensiveness.
- Show they value the relationship and a desire for it to be positive.

Responding With Validation and Appreciation, Rather Than Defensiveness

Here's what Mike Royer wrote, along with my commentary:

Hi Tiffany, thank you very much for this e-mail. I appreciate that you have taken the time to talk to me about this, instead of letting it go unspoken.

Royer indicates right off the bat that he values and appreciates her candor. This obviously increases the odds that she will be candid in the future, rather than letting misunderstandings and negative interactions go unaddressed, and instead fester.

I also appreciate the fact that you work hard and are dedicated. You do a very good job. So I know you not only work hard, but you are effective as well. I know that I say that to you frequently, the last time being your excellent handling of the conference call. But I will say it again here.

He offers her sincere praise and appreciation.

I am glad we are having this conversation, and I don't want you to be disappointed or upset.

First, he explicitly communicates that he values having such a candid conversation. Since many, if not most, employees learn that it's best to keep quiet, making this

message explicit helps to offset the fear of speaking up. This increases the likelihood that Tiffany will talk openly about issues in the future, rather than simmer with resentment.

Communicating “I care about you and how my behavior affects you”

He also shows his concern for her wellbeing and the impact he might have had. Again, since many employees have experienced a lack of concern for how they are affected by their manager, expressing concern can make a huge impact on how the employee feels about their manager and their job.

My intent was to make an inquiry and have a discussion about your schedule. I recognize that I do not know your whole schedule and I don't have the capacity to remember the details of your time. At breakfast I was operating from a text you sent me a 8PM the prior night.....referencing your need to be off so you could get your car registered.

I was at the Cheverus event and then went home to unwind and then go to bed. Then back up first thing in the morning to meet with you. (And the meeting I thought went very well.) I guess what I'm saying is you didn't give me much time or context to process the information, and I am also learning how to work with you and keep track of a schedule that is diverse.

Here, Royer provides context for his remarks in a clear, direct way, with no defensiveness. He also doesn't resort to any “If you only knew the rest of the story, you wouldn't have said what you did” scolding.

Tiffany's emotional response was driven by her interpretation that his comment meant he questioned her commitment. Thus, sharing where he was coming from can help

her see his remark in a different light, and lead to her having a different interpretation.

Providing Context To Clarify Their Misinterpretation Without Sounding Defensive

Providing context and some backstory when someone inaccurately interprets our behavior or comments is extremely useful, if...we also communicate our empathy for how they experienced it. Doing so helps make it clear that we are not trying to defend our position or tell them they are wrong. It helps make it clear that we want to foster a more complete and accurate understanding.

Also, by sharing his side of the experience, including the awkwardness of the text's timing, Royer helps Tiffany have greater understanding of how her approach affected him, without scolding or sounding defensive. This helps to make the interaction a Teachable Moment that can contribute to Tiffany's professional growth.

“Here's How We Can Move Forward”

So let me make a couple of points or suggestions for both of us.

Rather than simply make this a “point/counterpoint” back and forth about the past, Mike moves the focus to the future. This not only makes the email so much more useful and replete with actionable ideas, it also helps to create a positive trajectory.

Also notice the use of the phrase “for both of us.” Rather than play the boss card and make the coaching just about Tiffany, he removes the status and power differential

inherent in their positions by making the recommendations for both of them.

1. *I did grant your request, just mentioned my question about your time off.*

Without belaboring the point, he makes a brief, simple reminder to put his comment in context. He didn't grill her or make a pronouncement and then deny her request. He expressed an observation and then honored her request.

2. *I think you are doing a great job and I appreciate what you do for BTR and your growth and capability's.*

Here, he reiterates his positive regard for her and appreciation of the good work she does, infusing the message with a positive tone.

3. *We can talk more about your schedule when we meet, and also clarify the expectations. I don't want or need to micromanage you....you don't need it first of all and you don't want it I'm sure.*

The first sentence indicates they will continue the conversation and work out details so the problem won't arise again. The second sentence both shares his intentions related to micromanaging—he has no desire to—and communicates clearly he understands her feelings about micromanagement. This is a simple, yet helpful way of communicating “I get you; you've been heard”—something employees desperately want and often do not get from their manager.

4. *If I ask you a question it may seem to you like I'm questioning your commitment. I am asking a question because it's my job. It's my job to understand. I try to know as*

much as possible, but I can't know everyone's schedule, and I make mistakes. I can see that you think this was one of them.

In the first sentence, Mike Royer states where he is NOT coming from, what his intention is NOT.

Being Clear What You Are NOT Saying

Sometimes it's not enough to state our intention. Sometimes we need to clearly and directly state what we are NOT intending to say. This more explicit approach directly addresses what you believe the other person might be interpreting as your intention.

He then goes on to explain where he IS coming from. While we cannot *control* how another interprets what we say or do, we can *influence* their interpretation. We do that by providing more context and explaining our side of the interaction, as Royer does in this email.

In the last sentence of Point 4., he states that he gets it that Tiffany saw his response as a mistake.

5. *I feel that I am fortunate to have you as a partner in this company. I want you to be happy and I want you to feel comfortable to talk to me, and even push back like this if necessary. I can assure you that whatever I do I do it with good intentions....but I am human and I make mistakes.*

Reinforcing the Message “I appreciate you being candid”

Here you have more sincere appreciation, a clear message that he wants and values candor, and a reinforcement of his desire to do the right thing and the right thing by her. Imagine yourself getting this message from YOUR boss. Would you not appreciate that? Would you not feel even more bonded to them, more intent on doing right by them?

You have too, and when that happened I was understanding and we talked about it. So communication is key. If you think I am wrong tell me. Just as you have here.

This is a great example of reminding the other person “Hey...we can talk these things out. It doesn’t have to be a big deal if someone makes a mistake, because we can talk about it and work it out. We’ve done it before, and we can do it again. Reminding the other person about past successes—even if they were difficult to achieve—encourages them to see they CAN handle similar challenges in the future.

I know it’s hard not to take it personally when a question is asked about one’s performance, but if you could learn to do that, and consider it just one more thing Mike needs help with I believe you will manage the situation very well. So again thank you for writing to me.

This starts off with Royer empathizing with Tiffany’s experience of interpreting a question about her performance personally letting her know again that he “feels her pain.

Taking Away As Much of the Awkward Power Differential As Possible With Humility

Next, there’s the really sweet “*consider it just one more thing Mike needs help with*” comment.

This is a great example of what I believe is so important: reducing the awkward and even potentially humiliating experience as an employee when you are acutely aware of the power differential between you and your boss.

This usually plays out in conversations around performance, where the boss, the person in power, critiques or even disciplines the employee. In these interactions, the employee gets to experience the unpleasant one-down position they did as a child being in the principal’s office or being scolded by a parent. Such conversations can trigger awkwardness and embarrassment because they feel so adult-to-child rather than adult-to-adult.

Managers can prevent, or reduce, the awkwardness by subliminally signaling with both their voice tone and word choice “Even though I have more position power and the added responsibility of being accountable for your performance (so I need to make sure you’re performing well), I still see us as equals in the adult human being department and believe you deserve to be treated as such.”

Also, when a manager acknowledges that they could improve in some area, or they are open to feedback on how they can improve, it takes away much of the

unspoken, unpleasant power differential that can make working for someone else so psychically painful, especially for the most independent, self-directed individuals.

Since many employees have had bosses who prefer lording their power over their direct reports, getting this kind of respect is not only deeply appreciated, but also forges a stronger bond with the manager and the employer.

6. *I think I should have made an inquiry of your schedule instead of questioning you or implying excessive Fridays off. My mistake. I apologize.*

First, Royer communicates with his statement the following attitude: “I am open to examining how I interact. I don’t think that I get to act however I want because I’m the boss, and you just need to deal with it.”

Second, he apologizes.

Showing You Are Honorable and Worthy of Respect by Apologizing

It’s interesting, over the years when conducting management training, some managers have expressed concerns that if they acknowledge having made a mistake, and, “worse” yet, apologize, their employees would lose respect for them.

When I then poll seminar attendees about whether doing so would diminish or increase *their* respect for their boss if their boss apologized, it’s always a unanimous vote for “increase respect.”

At the risk of stating the obvious, their fear of losing respect if they admit they made a

mistake and, even “worse”, apologize is an unfortunate throwback to Old School management philosophy, where bosses ruled through fear and domination. In today’s work world, that’s obviously not an effective—let alone ethical or humane—practice.

I hope you can still have a good day off today. I hope you will know that I respect you and appreciate you.

And finally I hope that this letter addresses your concerns and that we will not have a lingering feeling that I have been unfair towards you.

Ending a Difficult Interaction On a High Note and Positive Trajectory

Royer closes the email on a high note, expressing concern for Tiffany as a person, concern about how she was affected by their interaction, and reinforces that he is coming to this relationship and situation with goodwill.

Wouldn’t It Be Better For This to Have Been a Face-To-Face Conversation?

You might have been thinking this throughout the article and I would agree, in most circumstances. However, in this situation, there are two factors which I believe made the email response wise, and a stylistic reason why I believe it was an exception that worked.

First, Royer chose to respond in email format because he received the email late on Friday and wanted to give Tiffany an answer as soon as possible, rather than

receive an answer on Monday. Being empathic, he could imagine how awkward it might feel to email your boss with complaints about how he handled a situation with you, and then get dead air.

Second, it seemed evident from Tiffany's past communication choices that she felt more comfortable composing her thoughts and relaying them through email rather than face-to-face, so Mike respected her preference. I imagine if the topic was more contentious and he felt the need to challenge Tiffany's position, he would have gone the face-to-face route.

This point leads to the stylistic reason why I believe this email worked. The tone of the email was caring, thoughtful, and non-defensive. Therefore, it wasn't likely to trigger a negative reaction as would a defensive, combative, "I'm right. You're wrong" email. He also made it clear that he was open and interested in further discussion if she would like.

On Monday, Mike checked in with Tiffany to make sure she gotten the email, which she had. He asked her if they were good, and she said "Yes."

Note: Yes, it would have been considerate if Tiffany had let Royer know she had received it, rather than leaving him wondering if she

had or had not received it, and the potential implications her not responding might have. It would have been nice if she had demonstrated the same thoughtfulness he had shown her.

Making the Most of This Story

First, I hope you take the overall message of mindfulness and thoughtfulness into all your conversations and interactions, and the huge impact being mindful and thoughtful can have...as well as the negative consequence of not being mindful or thoughtful.

Second, I encourage you to use this story to reflect on the huge benefit of being a person who is safe for others to speak candidly with—especially those with less power. By communicating in ways that communicate "it's safe to speak candidly with me," you will find it much easier managing and leading others because you will have honest conversations that get to the heart of issues and enable them to be resolved and put to rest.

Third, I hope you reread and review the email for verbiage that you can adapt and use to foster honest conversations about difficult issues.

Fourth, I encourage you to share this with your colleagues as a way to contribute to the creation of a candid, collaborative culture where people work well together.

About David Lee



David Lee, the founder of HumanNature@Work, works with employers who want to improve employee engagement, customer service, and morale. He has worked with organizations and presented at conferences both domestically and abroad.

An internationally recognized thought leader in the field of employee engagement and performance, he is the author of nearly one hundred articles and book chapters that have been published in trade journals and books in the US, Europe, India, Australia, and China. The second edition of the business classic, *The Talent Management Handbook*, features a chapter of his on the topic of Onboarding.

In addition to his research and work with both struggling and “best in class” organizations, David Lee’s work draws from a wide range of scientific disciplines including cognitive neuroscience, anthropology, psychoneuroimmunology, trauma and resilience research, and paleopsychology.

Taking this research which typically doesn’t find its way into the business world, David translates these principles of human nature into practical leadership and managerial strategies that optimize employee performance.

Using the popular TV show *The Dog Whisperer* as an analogy for the difference understanding human nature makes, David’s work helps leaders and managers become “Employee Whisperers.”

In his work with managers and leaders at all levels and his interviews with employees, he has found that “every better result you desire requires having a better conversation.”

Client Comments

“The value David provided our organization went far beyond the actual classroom experience. In addition to the wealth of information he provided during class, David provided a broad support system to further the development of our senior management team.

Specific elements included working with the team to articulate a behavioral vision, one-on-one coaching, individualized professional development plans, and a variety of other support services that enabled us to build a culture of teamwork, accountability, and excellent customer service. While everyone says they will help you be more productive and get better results from your people, David is the only one I’ve worked with who really helps you get there.”

Eric Henry, CEO and CIO at Hershey Trust Company

“Weeks after David Lee spoke to our college, people are still talking about the message he sent. One employee thanked our President and said it was a “gift to employees to hear David speak”. David took the time to get to know US before he stepped foot on campus. We didn’t expect the level of service that he provided. He interviewed people, sent out surveys and dug deep to find out exactly what our college needed to go from good to great. He then customized a program that fit what we needed and has been great with follow-up and feedback. It’s clear he truly cares. David does more than give a great speech a leave, he transforms the culture.”

Deb Carlson, PhD, Director of Institutional Research and Communication, Nebraska Methodist College: The Josie Harper Campus, NE

“I have utilized David’s services several times over the years. He treats each company as a unique entity and creates specific training plans based on each company’s needs. I like that he does not deliver a canned program, but makes the time to meet with HR, managers and CEO’s to understand the company culture. He partners with HR to create training plans for success. The Appraisal Process is all about Coaching and Feedback.

David customized a program for us that focused on our list of specific goals, worked with our management staff as a team and on a one-on-one basis, and created tools to ensure success. What is most impressive is that David followed up post appraisal process with an employee survey asking how the manager training impacted the new appraisal process. The survey results overwhelmingly verified that the training made a positive impact on our management team and their delivery of the new process to our employees. And, as a result of the survey process, we now know what areas to focus on for our future training needs. We look forward to working with David again as we continue to refine our appraisal and coaching efforts.”

Barbara Bartlett, Director of Human Resources, Infinity Federal Credit Union, ME

“We chose David Lee to provide us with customer service training over a well-known national franchise in part because of his customized approach. Rather than trying to convince us that a one-size-fits-all, off the shelf “solution” was just what we needed, he took the time to learn about our business and unique needs, and tailor a program to address them.

The fact that his program was addressing the real life issues our customer service and tech support people faced every day, combined with his engaging and informative training style, had a huge impact on our staff’s interest in, and commitment to, his ongoing program. It’s exciting

to hear everyone using the concepts from his training in conversation – his concepts have become our vernacular.

One of the other things that makes David such an effective trainer is the fact that he is clearly a voracious learner who is always on the lookout for new research or best practice to share with clients. Whether it's how stress affects the brain and its implications for engaging people in constructive conversations, or a million other applications of "human nature at work", David shares ideas and information you won't get in "standard" business programs delivered by the average consultant. I know I have used his examples with staff, customers and friends. If you want an effective and customized training program that will enhance your external and internal communication, David Lee is the best choice!"

Nancy Hellman, Loftware, NH

"Finally, a moment to reflect on the weekend. David, you lit them on fire!!!! I cannot tell you what a difference you made with this very unique group—you helped us to turn the tide and it was an incredibly productive weekend—and it has shaped our attitude and focus for the next few years.

You helped us collectively grab our minds and put them together in such a way that we were able to miraculously define our immediate VISION without so much as an hour of brainstorming. It just happened. It would have taken 2 or 3 board meetings to do what you helped us do.

I am still in disbelief, and am really impressed with your attitude David. You have such a special gift, and you just drove it home with everyone. I will never ever forget your time with us."

Josh Libby, President of the National Cued Speech Association, Washington, DC

"Thank you for doing such an outstanding job keynoting our conference. As you could tell by the response, participants loved both the content and the delivery of your presentation."

Dr. Ian Gawler, Director, The Gawler Foundation, Victoria, Australia

"I've now worked with over 150 presenters since you last were a part of MEBSR's Spring Conference, and still you stand out as the best person we've ever had come and present on how we best work with one another, increase productivity and thrive."

Sanna McKim, Executive Director, Maine Businesses for Social Responsibility, Maine

"I just want to thank you for such a great presentation! I got feedback that this was the best conference that we ever had. (Management at the venue) e-mailed me asking for your contact information. Apparently the staff that was working that day loved your message and they want to hear more. So - don't be surprised if you hear from them!"

Anne Charles, Maine Municipal Association, Maine

"I want to say a big thank you for the wonderful job you did in your presentations during our Quality Leadership Conference. You are a talented individual; thank you for sharing your gifts with Fairview."

Tom Hanson, Fairview Healthcare System, Minnesota

Related Resources By David Lee

Articles

[How to Address Negativity in a Positive Way](#)

[Managing Up: How to Bring Up a Difficult Issue With Your Boss](#)

[Let's Talk for a Change](#)

[3 Engagement-Enhancing Conversations Every Manager Should Have](#)

[What Happens When Leaders Show Humility and Openness to Feedback?](#)

[What to Do When Employee Feedback Goes Wrong](#)

Audio Recording

[Let's Talk for a Change](#) – This recording is of a keynote presentation on how to bring up and discuss difficult issues in a way that fosters honest, unguarded dialogue.

The Start Your Important Conversation Off Right Strategy Session – Because the success of your important conversation depends so much on how you start it off, you want to make sure you get the Declaration/Invitation right. This strategy session will help you get clear on the issues that need to be addressed, your desired outcome and how to articulate it, landmines to avoid, and how to put this all together into words.

It includes

1. A 60-minute one-on-one session.
2. The six step Better Results Through Better Conversations Protocol
3. The workbook to David's Better Results Through Better Conversations seminar.

To Learn More About How David Lee Can Help you Achieve Better Results Through Better Conversations:

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