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Moaners are something to groan about

By Emma Jacobs

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Rosa Evans, a personal assistant at an investment bank, is tired of colleagues' moaning. In recent months, as the bankers discovered their bonuses would be cut, the complaining has scaled new heights. "Even though many of their colleagues have lost their jobs and public opinion is against them getting any kind of a bonus, I hear daily how badly off they are. It creates a terrible atmosphere," she says. "I tell them they are lucky to have their jobs but they don't see it that way."

The most habitual complainer, she says, even cuts out gloomy headlines from newspapers and sticks them up above his desk. The effect? "Every time I see him I feel like killing him."

An occasional gripe can be no bad thing. It may relieve stress and it provides a useful social function, says Gurnek Bains, chief executive of corporate psychologists YSC in London. "We need to meet and share stories," he says. "Trading misery is a bit like monkeys picking fleas off each other. It brings people together."

But when getting something off your chest tips into destructive complaining that demoralises everyone in the workplace, it becomes harmful – and, as recession bites, could cost you your job.

According to Thierry Guedj, a workplace psychologist at Boston University: “People who are moaners are more likely to get cut in a recession. Nobody likes to have them around. It can be very disruptive to have consistent complainers on staff. They bring morale down and reduce productivity.”

Moaning can be divisive, Prof Guedj adds. “Downturns require people to pull together and trust each other. The worry is that people who are critical of others may also be critical of you behind your back.”

Even if you have good reason for complaint, such as high levels of anxiety, recessionary times may perversely demand you remain as upbeat as possible. “No one wants to be in the trenches with a miserable moaner who brings everyone down,” says Janet Banks, who has overseen many waves of redundancy as a vice-president in human resources at Chase Manhattan Bank from 1980 to 1994 and as managing director at FleetBoston Financial from 1996 to 2003.

Criticism is not completely off-limits. According to Prof Guedj, it can help identify problems and challenge the company’s status quo: “It’s fine to moan as long as it is done for the benefit of an organisation. Complaining, for example, about how poor sales in a company are points to a problem that needs to be overcome.”

The key is to be constructive, says Mr Bains: “Looking at the negatives can be helpful, but only if you work through it.”

He cites a newly appointed chief executive who on his first day in the job seized on the company’s problems and complained to the managing director. “At first, the managing director was pleased his new appointment had identified the problems. It is fairly normal for people to complain about the problems they have inherited.” Fairly soon, however, it became clear that the chief executive focused only on the negatives. He was shortly moved out of the organisation.

The point about moaning, says Ben Leichtling, author of *Eliminate the High Cost of Low Attitudes*, is to be sparing. He says: “A quick vent can help you release tension and turn back to your task with renewed energy. The crucial word is ‘quick’.”

What if you are not the person doing the moaning? If a colleague turns into a constant whinger, steer clear, advises Mr Leichtling. “They can ruin your career. Fight the urge to sympathise by adding your own complaints. Smile politely and move on. If they follow, close the door, tell them you have urgent work to do or ask their help in your work. They’ll probably leave.”

Some take a more informal approach. One executive recalls a colleague known for her negativity. “She was so depressing that if she ever trapped someone and moaned at them for more than five minutes, we had a system in place to rescue the victim with a phone call to their extension.”

Confronting a complainer can be tricky if they are senior. Mark Amtower, a consultant based in Maryland in the US, regularly attends meetings at a family-owned business. “One of the daughters is

a whiner. In the middle of my presentation she starts on a long, low whine. I simply turned to her and said very bluntly: ‘Will you stop whining!’” Her family had indulged her behaviour and her employees lacked the courage to confront it. His objection emboldened her staff: on a subsequent visit, Mr Amtower was amused to see they had put up a sign that read: “No whining zone.”

How should a manager tackle a moaner? Mr Leichtling recounts an IT worker in an insurance company who was a relentless offender. “He had a cluster form around him – a moaning club. They were wholly unproductive and created tensions within the workforce by ostracising those that didn’t join in.”

Rather than monitor the IT worker’s attitude, he set out work agreements, agreeing on targets and monitoring whether information was passed on effectively. Ultimately, the moaner failed to meet his targets and left the company.

Tackling a habitual moaner is very different to stamping out all moaning in the workplace, and a manager who ignores dissent entirely is misguided, says Mr Bains. “There are some leaders who just shield themselves from the negative side and it makes it hard for bad news to get through to them. There is generally some kernel of truth in moaning that needs to be addressed.” A good leader, he suggests, “is able to see the negative but do something with it.”

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