

# May I See Your Whine List?

Beverly Kaye

By learning to identify what's beneath five common employee complaints, managers can turn whines into wins.

**I**t was time to review the employee survey results that her organization had disseminated several months ago. Anxiously, the talent manager picked up the first report. As she scanned it, her eyes caught one set of responses that had reared its ugly head for the past few years: questions about careers and development conversations with managers.

Again, the responses were disappointing. She leaned back in her chair and thought about the efforts over the past year to improve this area. Nothing seemed to move the needle. Glancing over the comment section, she read complaint after complaint. She knew that managers would not be thrilled when confronted with yet another request to do a better job conducting individual development planning conversations.

With a long sigh, she picked up her yellow highlighter and decided to power through. Actually, she couldn't wait to finish up and get home, maybe relax with a nice glass of red.


## The Whine List

HR leaders for whom this is a common scenario are in good company. Ever since the financial collapse of 2008, line managers have been under siege, with increased pressure from the executives above to make cuts, do more with less and keep the troops motivated. Add to that increased discontent from the employees below, who are feeling overwhelmed, underutilized, frustrated, underpaid — and just plain unhappy with their jobs. And when employees are unhappy, what do they do when it's time for their organizational surveys? They unload. And what do embattled managers do in the face of this discontent? Many duck the topic altogether and simply avoid opening Pandora's box. The rest? Well, they often unload on their HR leaders.

Research into employee engagement and retention shows that career opportunities are continually cited as a major reason for both disengagement and turnover. A 2008 survey of 3,000 workers from multiple industries conducted by Career Systems International showed that 77 percent of employees believe they have more abilities than they are currently using in their work. Only 54 percent said they know how to find out about career opportunities in their organization, and 50 percent of managers reported that they know how to help their employees see the organization as a job market. These results are not surprising; employees want to feel there are opportunities in their current organization.

HR leaders can make a positive impact by coaching managers on how to use tried-and-true methods to engage employees. A mindset shift is required to help line managers use "whine sessions" as opportunities to delve into what's really important to employees. There are many opportunities for conversations that come from sincere inquiry. The question "What can I do to keep you satisfied, engaged and on my team?" is rarely asked and provides great data. When answers come couched in a complaint, the tone and negativity can shut down the dialogue. If we can help managers to see that people complain about what they care about, perhaps they will listen a bit deeper and a bit longer. Managers must understand that they don't need to move mountains. But they can make wise use of their workers' whine lists instead of simply succumbing to fatalistic "here we go again" thinking.

The most important thing HR leaders can do is help managers understand that what sounds like a whine is actually an opportunity to understand employees' grievances and their specific requests for change. And when managers understand their employees better,



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### Smart Answers to Five Vintage Gripes

With the right “vintner” mindset, line managers can mature the whines they hear, opening them up to let them breathe and mellow, and then address them in a productive manner. Here are five classic career whines managers will typically encounter and tips for how to make a difference by reframing the conversation, getting beneath the complaint and finding out what’s really important to employees.

**A whine for the future:** “Things are changing so fast. I don’t know what to expect around the next turn, and things seem so unstable.” Rapid change has created uncertainty and fear in the workplace. In the absence of good information, employees will often fill in the gaps with worst-case scenarios. The more line managers

trated and dissatisfied. It’s important for managers to show they have a genuine interest in their people and curiosity about what parts of their work are the most rewarding. The more employees can increase their sense of career fit — the areas where their interests and skills intersect — the more that real passion for their work will be enabled. This is a great opportunity for line managers to:

- Match talent to business needs.
- Discover hidden or underutilized skills and abilities.
- Check assumptions about individual capabilities.
- Learn more about the interests and values of their employees.
- Motivate employees more effectively.

When managers understand these talents, they can more easily grow and retain employees and effectively assign challenges to their teams.

## What sounds like a whine is actually an opportunity to understand employees’ grievances and their specific requests for change.

**A brand of whine:** “I don’t feel people recognize how much I have to offer or give me enough respect. Things can get so political here.” Sometimes employees have a poor sense of their internal brand or how others in the organization perceive their strengths and weaknesses. Managing one’s reputation within the work context is a vital component to long-term success, yet many people fail to recognize this, or simply neglect it, to their peril. Managers who have direct conversations with employees

and give them perspective on how they’re viewed provide a powerful gift. Managers can:

- Prepare employees to gather feedback from a variety of sources, such as peers, customers, mentors, coaches, team leaders and team members.
- Guide employees to leverage strengths and develop in ways that support their future growth.
- Lead and manage their teams effectively by offering frequent, timely feedback.

Retention research suggests that employees leave because they have no idea how much they’re valued by the organization or how to envision a career happening inside it. Clear feedback allows individuals to make appropriate choices, to know how they are perceived and to manage that perception.

**A choice whine:** “I feel stifled, stuck and impatient. There’s nowhere to go, and management seems to assume I should just be happy to have a job.” When people feel taken for granted or that they have no choice or room to grow, they lose enthusiasm, and managers will lose their employees’ best work. Managers can instill patience and hope by helping employees discover where growth can happen and identify career options. When employees understand how to realistically

can help them understand the specific work context, the better employees will be able to gauge where things are headed, the kinds of skills that will be valued in the future and areas where they can develop themselves. Managers can:

- Prepare employees for changes on the horizon.
- Share which skills and abilities are essential to the organization’s future.
- Enable employees to anticipate and manage change more effectively.
- Define organizational norms and culture more clearly.
- Help employees make more informed development decisions.

Helping employees identify information sources prepares them to stay in tune with trends and up to date with the forces that will impact their careers.

**A whine of value:** “I’m not using all my abilities. I’m not doing what I value. This isn’t what I came here for.” HR leaders must help managers remember that whines sour when they sit around too long, so they shouldn’t delay initiating these conversations. Employees who feel they’re not being properly utilized get bored, frus-

evaluate their career possibilities, including the opportunity to enrich their current jobs with stretch assignments and participation in cross-functional task forces, creative energy can be harnessed again. Managers can:

- Encourage employees to work on several career goals at the same time.
- Connect their plans to the organization's strategy.
- Identify options to enrich their jobs and careers.
- Help them discover opportunities to enhance skills and abilities.
- Provide reality checks as goals are being defined.

When employees recognize that opportunities exist and there are multiple ways for them to grow and develop, their commitment and contributions build. Creating development goals that include contingencies for shifts and changes, and that align with the organization's direction, will help position individuals and teams for success.

**A select whine:** "There's no plan in place for me, so I'm not sure how to make my goals happen." When employees' interest is sparked by career options, they need help to select, construct and implement a realistic plan that includes specific learning needs and concrete steps for achieving their goals. This is the manager's opportunity to:

- Motivate employees to take action.
- Monitor progress and step in to help.
- Identify barriers that might derail plans.
- Offer connections that support career goals.

Managers play a crucial role by building an environment that supports learning, encourages inquiry, rewards growth and challenges employees to pursue their own definitions of career success. When this happens, the word gets out. Talented employees are attracted to work for development-focused leaders.

### Salut! Prost! Skol! Nostrovia! Kampai! A Votre Sante!

The manager's job is difficult. As changes in the economy pick up steam, the job will get even harder. There is no time to wait and no wiggle room. Organizations and managers who waste time now will likely lose what employees have to offer in the present and also in the future.

The good news is that the efforts required of line managers don't demand a huge amount of time or a large budget. If managers learn to truly listen to what's beneath the whine, they can gain deep insights into what's most important to employees. And if managers focus on adopting vintage solutions, they will feel empowered and ready to deal with employees' issues, help them with their concerns and guide them in improving their situations.

Whining is an unattractive adult trait, but successful managers will use career development discussions with their employees to turn those classic whines into lasting wins. **TM**

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