



## When an External Constituent is Unhappy - Quick Tips

The 16th century poet, John Donne, titled a well-known poem, “No man is an island...” and, as it is for we humans it is also true for academic units. No unit large or small is completely independent of those outside of the university who take special interest in the actions of the faculty and staff. If one serves as an academic leader the day will inevitably come when a complaint arrives by letter, email, telephone call, personal visit, text message or other means. Failure to handle the complaint appropriately can provoke unwarranted criticism, negative publicity, retaliation, calls for political intervention, petitions for dismissal of the leader and other undesirable actions, or.... no reaction at all. Complaints should never be ignored but it is important to recognize that some may be of a frivolous nature or completely outside of your zone of authority.

### *Initial Steps*

- It is tempting to make a snap judgement and respond immediately. Avoid that; such responses are often rash and can further exacerbate a difficult situation.
- If the complaint comes to you directly or to a trusted subordinate, it is important to promptly acknowledge that the message has been received. Failure to do so will likely lead to a further complaint that you are ignoring a legitimate concern.
- If the complaint comes to you as a rumor, a response is not justified.
- Consider whether you have sufficient information on which to base an informed decision on future action.
- If more information is needed, seek it.
- Finally, if the complaint has potential to bring adverse publicity to your unit or the institution, discuss the situation with your immediate supervisor even if it may be embarrassing to you.

### *Decide a Course of Action*

- In most cases there are two options: (1) the complaint is valid and corrective action must be taken or, (2) the complaint is not based in fact and no change should be made.
- In the first case (1) thank the person for bringing the matter to your attention, indicate the action you plan to take and ask if there is any further advice.
- The second case (2) is more difficult:
  - First, be sure that you clearly understand the nature of the situation. It may be that the actual complaint is a superficial issue and is brought forward in order to provoke a reaction that benefits the aggrieved in some manner. As you consider possible motivations, avoid speculating beyond what is reasonable.
  - Once relevant facts have been considered, decide the nature of the response.
- If warranted discuss your decision with legal counsel.





## Communicate

- The key to an acceptable outcome depends to a significant extent on the message and how it is delivered. This is not a time for arrogance or assertion of authority.
- Never underestimate the power of personal interaction. If possible, schedule a meeting with the individual or parties bringing the complaint forward. If not, contact the individual by telephone. Adverse messages communicated through cold, impersonal means (letter, email, text etc.) are generally not well-received.
- Plan carefully for the conversation. If available and the potential risk of escalation is real, discuss preparation of a communications plan with the public or external relations officer of the university.
- Do not countenance a “hidden” agenda. Hidden agendas are never truly secret and exposure of your true objectives will compromise your ability to manage the situation.
- Hold the meeting:
  - It is often advisable to have a witness with you in case the aggrieved subsequently challenges what you said.
  - Often conversations of this nature will focus on interpretation of facts from which the aggrieved person’s point of view is derived. Be prepared to listen to the complainant and to present accurate facts from the information you have.
  - At no point should you allow yourself to lose control of your emotions. Respect the other party regardless of how you are treated.
- If it becomes apparent that consensus cannot be achieved, your goal should be to sustain the relationship so that over time it may be possible to continue the discourse.

## Anonymous Complaints

- Anonymous complaints can range from those that reflect genuine and valid concerns to the irrelevant, those intended to harm innocent individuals or those intended to create advantage for an individual or group. They should not be ignored; neither should they be given unwarranted attention. Serious decisions should never be based on anonymous complaints without independent, collaborating verification.
- It is impossible to respond to an anonymous complainant directly. But, it may be appropriate to respond discreetly through comments in faculty meetings, departmental newsletters. A public statement might be of this nature, “I understand there has been concern about.....”

## Afterwards

- Absolutely fulfill any commitments that you have made during this process.
- It may be appropriate to seek professional advice if the aggrieved individual or party subsequently misrepresents your comments during the meeting. The best course may be to avoid comment.

