



## Episode 56: How to Turn Complaints into Action

Welcome to In the Right Direction podcast, where we believe you get to choose what's on your plate, you can manage the overwhelm, and that change is possible. I'm your host, Deb Elbaum, and I'm here to share insights and strategies to increase your happiness, one baby step at a time. Let's dive in.

Hi everyone, it's Deb. Here are the starting questions today: What do you do when someone complains to you? Do you listen quietly? Get defensive? Try to convince them of the rationale?

Today, let's talk about complaining. People complain all the time in life and work. In coaching sessions, I hear about lots of different examples of complaining. One client told me that his colleague often just walks into his office, without knocking, sits down, and starts complaining about their department. Another client told me about her colleague, who's also a friend, who calls her after work to complain about the meetings they had that day.

It's easy to understand why people complain. On a brain level, it feels good. It gives our brain a dopamine hit when we get judgmental and feel justified and "right." Complaining can also be a habit. The more we do something, the easier it is to fall into an old pattern.

Sometimes, complaining feels beneficial. It's a way to discharge our anger and frustration, to have ourselves be heard, and to bond with others.

Yet, here's the problem with complaining. First, it keeps our brain stuck in a judgmental, critical mode. It keeps our brain below the line and operating from stressed out thinking that is not our best thinking. When we're complaining, we aren't able to access our prefrontal cortex, which is necessary for our higher-level, effective thinking.

Complaining equals stuck thinking, and our complaining behaviors become habits that can be hard to break free from.

Second, in a work environment, too much complaining can affect how you're seen. Our behaviors directly influence our presence and how we are perceived by others. Our behaviors create our brand. A lot of complaining can create a brand you might not want.

Here's the big idea you need to remember. There's something underlying our complaining. Underneath a complaint is a wanting, a longing. We complain because there's something we want. We don't want what we're complaining about; we do want something else.

That's the idea that today's coaching strategy is based on. Our coaching tool today uses the power of the underlying wanting to shift a complaint into more productive thinking. This makes it easier to take action that breaks the cycle and moves someone forward.

Today's strategy is a coaching question that you can ask when you hear someone complaining, whether it's a colleague, team member, or even yourself.

Here's the coaching question: What do you want more of?

What do you want more of?

This question is powerful because it breaks the cycle of complaining. It says to the brain, hey brain, I hear that you're stuck. I will assume that you don't want to be stuck – that even though it might feel temporarily satisfying to be judgmental, what you really want is to move toward a solution instead.

Because what we all ultimately want is to feel in control, capable, and empowered.

This is the question that can help. When you ask the question, what do you want more of?, you're giving the brain an opportunity to shift its thinking path and move above the line into clear, focused, and confident thinking.

Now, sometimes, when you ask this question to someone who is complaining, the response is silence. Their brain was so in a complaining groove, that it's hard for it to shift direction. That's ok. This is a question that works to be repeated a few times until the brain gets the message that it's invited to build new thinking pathways.

Here's an example of how to use this question. When I start a coaching engagement with a leader, we often have an alignment meeting with the coaching sponsor, who is usually the person's boss. In this 3-person alignment meeting, everyone gets to share their high-level goals for the coaching.

Sometimes, a boss will start talking about the problems they see that need attention. They might talk about the person's difficulty with certain stakeholders, or their tendency to get stuck in the weeds.

They share examples of things that aren't working. In essence, they're complaining.

After I acknowledge what they've shared, I usually ask this, "What leadership qualities do you want more of from this person?"

What I've found is that this question shifts the conversation dramatically. It invites people to shift their perspective from what hasn't worked in the past to what would be more effective in the future.

When I ask, What leadership qualities do you want this person to bring more of?, it's an opportunity to clarify goals and identify specific action steps.

For example, let's say the boss says that they want more relationship building from the coachee. That leads nicely to the next question: who would be good to have more regular conversations with?

As the boss answers this, we've now identified concrete action.

Or, say the boss says that they want more of big-picture thinking and thinking about where the department might be in 3 years. That's helpful, because now we have some strategic thinking questions that my client can carve out time to think about.

What do you want more of? leaps over the unproductive complaining to see what's really under that – an opportunity for more of something else.

When we shift the conversation to more of something else, we are now talking about people's capabilities, strengths, goal-setting, and choice.

That ultimately feels so much better because then we get to recognize and build on our strengths. We get to remember that we are learners who are always working to develop ourselves.

Identifying what we want more of also helps us define clearer metrics of success in a role, and clarity around expectations is always helpful.

What do you want more of? Reminds us that more is possible. We can be active problem-solvers. We do not have to stay stuck in what's not working – we get to put our energies to what is in our control – and choosing intentionally is empowering.

Let's bring this to you.

Let's talk about how and when you might use this question to break old patterns and help shift complaining to solutioning and action.

If you have a colleague whose habit is to complain about meetings, the next time they complain, try asking this: What do you want more of in our meetings? You might come up with some ideas together that you could implement to create more effective and focused meetings.

If you have a direct report who complains about difficult work or an inability to get things done, the next time they complain, ask them this: What do you want more of? Maybe they want more clarity around priorities, or more appreciation, or more stretch assignments. It's an opportunity for the two of you to brainstorm and experiment.

Lastly, this is also a powerful question that we can ask ourselves to shift our brain from below the line to above the line. If you hear yourself complaining, pause and ask yourself this: What do I want more of? See what comes to mind – more boundaries? More self-care? More fun?

Then identify one action step you can take to get more of what you want in your life.

We all want things in our life, and naming and recognizing what we do want is the first step toward creating an intentional life. Using your brain to focus on solutions and actions that are in your control will help you create a life that honors your values, purpose, and priorities.

Thank you so much for listening and being part of my community. If you would like help shifting the complaining in your life to solutioning and more productive thinking, please reach out. Email me at [deb@debelbaum.com](mailto:deb@debelbaum.com) or go to my website [debelbaum.com](http://debelbaum.com) to schedule a consult. I look forward to it. I'm here to help you create your best self at home and at work, so that you're confident you're moving in the right direction for you.

Until next time!