



## TenStep Supplemental Paper

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### **Consultants Should be Wary of Complaining About Their Company in Front of the Client**

There are some people who live by the following mantra: "It is everyone's God given right to complain about the company they work for." In fact, these people may be right. Many times, complaints can be used to improve the situation. Even when nothing can be done to ameliorate the situation, sometimes the person will feel better because their problems have been heard. For managers, it is usually better to have people complain directly to them so they know what is going on. It is always more frustrating to hear vague comments that people are complaining, but to not know who or why.

Yes, everyone has a God given right to complain. It's actually in the Constitution, only there they call it a more general right of free speech. However, like all rights, this one is not absolute. It's one thing to work for a regular company and complain about something to your co-workers. It's another thing to be a consultant and complain about your company in front of the client.

#### **First, try not to be a complainer**

Probably the place to start this discussion is to first state that it doesn't pay to be a complainer. Everyone knows that no company is perfect, and it is not unusual to run across situations or policies that might not be as employee-friendly as you would like. In many cases, a person seeks comfort by sharing the situation with a colleague. The reason he/she speaks to a colleague is usually to get a sympathetic ear. The hope is that the colleague will agree with him/her and perhaps come back with a similar story. This is truly an instance of the old adage "misery loves company."

The second reason that a person might talk with a colleague is because he/she wants to get a different opinion about the situation. In many cases, the colleague may tell him/her that he/she is off-base on his/her complaint, remind him/her that everyone has the same rules, or perhaps give him/her ideas on how to get around the situation.

All people probably have a reason to complain about specific things once in a while. However, some people complain about everything. You know, the company is bad, your manager is no good, your job stinks, etc. These people quickly get the reputation of being complainers, and then most people stop taking their complaints seriously.

#### **Consultants have a different set of rules**

Although everyone complains from time to time, there is a different standard when it comes to consultants and contractors. Consultants have to be careful about what they say and to whom, or it can do damage to their company and to their own job. Consultants complain for the same reason that regular employees complain. Since you work with clients every day and feel comfortable around them, sometimes there is a tendency to confide in them as well.

#### **Complaining to a client typically causes nothing but harm**



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The only purpose of complaining to a client is to try to get a sympathetic reaction. Unlike complaining to a colleague, clients are rarely going to be in a position to help, and they are not normally going to want to get involved from the standpoint of providing alternatives. On the other hand, a lot of negatives can occur.

**Loss of prestige.** A consultant who complains to the client instantly loses some of his/her personal prestige. Most of the company employees don't want to hear about it anyway. Managers especially will start to question a consultant's judgment. Fair or not, more than one consultant has been labeled a complainer.

**Loss of business.** Consultants who complain to the client can also negatively influence the client's perception of the entire consulting company. This is especially the case if more than one person from the same company is complaining. When it comes time to staff another consulting position, these managers may well look for other options for obtaining consultants. Even if it is not obvious, they could be building up mental prejudices against candidates from certain companies. Even though most managers can tolerate employee complainers up to a point, they usually don't have that same tolerance for consultant complainers. These consultants are often not kept on any longer than their original assignment called for, even when their work could possibly have been useful in the future.

**Loss of a job.** Most consulting firms won't tolerate having their consultants make derogatory remarks to their clients. As mentioned previously, these complaints can result in the consultant themselves coming off the project earlier than they might have, and it can potentially result in lost business for the consulting company. If your company hears about instances where you complain in front of the client, you could be subject to immediate dismissal.

### Summary

Complaining is a part of human nature, and everyone does it sometimes. People who complain too often are simply labeled as complainers and their complaints are no longer taken seriously. Of course, consultants are people too, and it would be too much to expect that they would never complain about anything.

The key difference is the audience. A consultant simply cannot be complaining to a client or bad-mouthing his/her company in front of a client. The client is not in a position to help, and usually any reaction you are going to get will be a negative one.

You will lose personal prestige, since clients wonder why you don't have the common sense to know that you don't complain in front of them.

You may cost your company money because your assignment will be short or because the client may become biased against your company on future business opportunities.

You may lose your job. You can imagine if a client shares back to your consulting firm the nature of your complaints, your job could be in serious jeopardy – either at the end of your assignment or even immediately.



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The bottom line is as follows. First, don't be a complainer! Second, if you must complain about something, talk to your manager or a consulting co-worker. Don't complain to your client or in front of them. If you do, usually nothing but bad things will happen.