



MOVING BEYOND THE E-VENT LEVEL

We all need to vent once in a while, right? Each of us has times in the office when we're pushed beyond the bounds of our patience. A coworker fails to complete her end of an important project by the deadline—again. Or, worse, the management team pursues a strategy that we think is doomed to failure—and disregards our fervent warnings. So, what do we do to resolve our anger and frustration? We often turn to a third person, not to help us find ways to make our feelings known to the individual who has aggrieved us, but merely to blow off steam.

Blowing off steam to a neutral party has its place. It can diffuse unproductive emotions over minor slights and let us get back to work without the need for a major confrontation. Venting can also give us a chance to collect additional information to bolster our argument if we decide to try again to make our opinion heard. And, if we're lucky and rant to the right person, sometimes our grievances can actually effect change. But chances are just as high that news of our backbiting will spread beyond the cubicle walls and directly to the object of our tirade, potentially escalating the conflict.

Disgruntled Workers of the World Unite!

Vault.com seeks to make a profit by providing forums for the disgruntled workers of the world to express their frustration about hard-nosed bosses and dwindling stock options—anon-ymously. The dot.com's founders believe that employees who publicly disclose their company's shortcomings can actually improve their workplaces by pressuring leaders to alter troubling policies or chastise ineffective supervisors. The so-called Electronic Watercooler™ also serves as a source

YOUR WORKOUT CHALLENGE

Systems Thinking Workout is designed to help you flex your systems thinking muscles. In this column, we introduce scenarios that contain interesting systemic structures. We then encourage you to read the story; identify what you see as the most relevant structures and themes; capture them graphically in causal loop diagrams, behavior over time graphs, or stock and flow diagrams; and, if you choose, send the diagrams to us with comments about why the dynamics you identified are important and where you think leverage might be for making lasting change. We'll publish selected diagrams and comments in a subsequent issue of the newsletter. Fax your diagrams and analysis to (781) 894-7175, or e-mail them to editorial@pegasuscom.com.

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of insider information on the benefits of working for a particular company, providing a free source of recruiting PR.

Discussions on the bulletin boards range from a female job candidate warning others about an interviewer's sexism to an employee boasting about his organization's bonus policy. But under the guise of "free speech," participants' rhetoric sometimes degenerates into childish name-calling and rumor-mongering. Entries such as "The CTO is a complete idiot!" and "XYZ company's hiring policies suck" are commonplace. Unfortunately, such faceless tirades seem unlikely to lead to constructive change in the target individual or organization.

What Goes Around . . .

To prove the company's dedication to workers' right to vent, Vault.com even provides an anonymous electronic bulletin board for its own employees. The forum became quite active, with staffers frequently sounding off about their disgruntlements. Trouble started when contributors began to suspect that certain posts were being deleted. In response, two employees set up an alternative bulletin board at Bitch-

vault.com, where they invited Vault.com workers to chat without fear of censorship.

What Vault.com executives might have learned the hard way is that, like familiarity, anonymity breeds contempt—and undermines more constructive ways to address complaints. To combat employees' reliance on venting to handle their frustrations, companies would be better served by building cultures of trust and openness, where people feel comfortable airing their grievances openly. For once staffers "own" their observations about a problem, they can contribute to finding a solution—something they can't do by merely ranting and raving to outsiders. ■

—Janice Molloy

Source: "Bitch, Bitch, Bitch" by Janelle Brown, *Salon.com*, February 1, 2001

YOUR THOUGHTS

Please send your comments about any of the articles in **THE SYSTEMS THINKER** to editorial@pegasuscom.com. We will publish selected letters in a future "Feedback/Followup" column. Your input is valuable!