

on the discussion outcome or the group-level competence in general. While this is intuitively plausible, our findings consistently show a very different picture.

In a large study of N=59 groups from 19 companies in Germany, Kauffeld (2006b) demonstrated that complaining has a statistically significant, strong negative impact not only on the discussion outcome (group member satisfaction and applicability of the solutions that were developed in the discussion), but also on organizational outcomes such as corporate success and corporate innovation. Table 2 shows the correlations between complaining and these outcomes (cf. Kauffeld, 2006b).

Table 2: Pearson's correlations between complaining behavior and success measures

	<i>Group member ratings</i>		<i>Observer ratings</i>	<i>Management ratings</i>	
	Satisfaction with the discussion	Applicability of solutions	Implication of solutions in the workplace	Corporate success	Corporate innovation
Complaining	-.32**	-.37**	-.69**	-.41*	-.46*

As these results show, complaining is not just an everyday habit that we like to cultivate, but is rather harmful not only for the group, but even for the company as a whole. Why is it that complaining has such a strong impact? Suppose that complaining is not something that is uttered by individual team members every once in a while, but rather a collective phenomenon in terms of the expression of a negative group mood. As we explained above, emotional contagion describes the process by which complaining may lead to more complaining. While this makes sense intuitively, we also found empirical support for this process.

Complaining circles can be defined as sequences of complaining statements (complaining – complaining – complaining) or sequences of complaining, support, and subsequent further complaining (complaining – support – complaining). Here are some examples for these communication patterns:

- Group member A: “We’ve tried to do that like five times now and nothing ever changed.” (*Complaining*)
- Group member B: “Whatever you try in this company, nothing ever happens.” (*Complaining*)
- Group member C: “It’s like, we’ve had all these ideas and they’ve never gone anywhere.” (*Complaining*)

- Group member B: “No one cares about our problems.” (*Complaining*)
Group member A: “Yeah, exactly.” (*Support*)
Group member C: “It’s like you don’t count at all.” (*Complaining*)

The second example points out the potentially deleterious effect of support. In our opinion, supporting a complaining statement should be seen as complaining itself because it can lead to a complaining circle and thereby build a negative group mood.

Kauffeld and Meyers (in press) examined 33 group discussions with video recordings and *act4teams* coding. To determine whether complaining circles actually exist, they used lag sequential analysis. This statistical method determines the likelihood of specific statements following one another. They found that indeed, complaining circles as communication patterns occur significantly above chance. Moreover, sequence analysis showed that complaining statements inhibited subsequent solution-oriented statements which are crucial for discussion and team success. We have replicated these findings with other samples. Complaining circles seem to be pervasive in all kinds of groups and business branches. Considering the results of Kauffeld (2006b) as shown in Table 2, it becomes evident that complaining circles are dysfunctional not only in terms of group mood and team member satisfaction, but also in terms of team-level and organizational outcomes. So what can be done to counteract this dysfunctional communication pattern?

What you can do

3. Counteracting complaining circles

Complaining circles may be “tackled” in several ways. First of all, methodological or structuring statements can be used to consciously break up complaining patterns and get back to the topic. Second, the employing organization can take measures to design work in a way that puts more emphasis on employees’ ideas and innovation potential.

Our research has demonstrated that methodological statements inhibit complaining behavior. Sensitizing a team for these matters may include facilitator training for one or all group members. Third, an external consultant or group facilitator can be useful for reflecting upon the team situation and developing towards a more constructive group mood. Teams can be educated about the negative effects of complaining behavior not only on the discussion, but

also on team and organizational outcomes. We will elaborate these three possibilities a little further.

a) Methodological statements against complaining

Before turning to team consulting or coaching, there is a simple way for team members to break up complaining circles.

In sequence analysis, we have not only examined complaining circles, but have also taken a closer look at other statements preceding or following complaining statements. Research results by Kauffeld (2006b) and Kauffeld and Meyers (in press) demonstrate that one way to break up complaining circles is to make a methodological statement. In *act4teams*, positive methodological remarks comprise the following criteria (cf. Table 1):

- Goal orientation (e.g., “Let’s get back to our topic, which is...”)
- Clarification/ concretization (e.g., finishing the sentence for someone who is missing a word)
- Procedural suggestion (e.g., “Let’s hear what everyone thinks about this one”)
- Procedural question (e.g., “Should we move on to the next point on our agenda?”)
- Prioritizing (e.g., “Let’s talk about this first, that’s more important”)
- Time management (e.g., “We only have five minutes left to talk now”)
- Task distribution (e.g., “Please write that down”)
- Visualization (e.g., using a flip chart)
- Weighing up costs and benefits (e.g., “If we take the time to do this properly, we can save a lot of time in the long run”)
- Summary (e.g., “So far, we’ve talked about ...”)

b) Organizational design against complaining

When employees complain, this does not necessarily mean that they have a bad attitude, but it may actually be due to an unfavorable work environment. Within the conceptualization of *act4teams*, complaining statements are characterized by an emphasis on the negative status quo, by pessimism, and killer phrases. Representative of a negative and unpleasant mood, complaining is an expression of a pessimistic perspective. While team members differ in their amount of complaining in a discussion, they often share experiences where they indeed have

not been able to make a change or optimize their work according to their ideas. For example, a team can have many insights and improvement suggestions concerning their work processes, but if they have a supervisor who does not support these ideas, they tend not to go very far. Our facilitation experience has shown over and over again that while the management may be well aware of the benefits of teamwork, the immediate supervisors of work teams often are not and will not support their teams appropriately.

One important job design factor that can help increase positive self-competence (i.e., interest in change, personal responsibility, and measure planning in a discussion) and help diminish the negative aspect of self-competence (e.g., complaining) is job autonomy. There is a substantial amount of research demonstrating the beneficial effects of giving more autonomy to work teams (for an overview, see Sundstrom, McIntyre, Halfhill, & Richards, 2000). Kauffeld (2006a) found that the work characteristics participation, formal team communication, continuous improvement process, training and team-oriented tasks were beneficial in self-directed work teams. It can be deduced that giving employees the opportunity to actively participate in and autonomously improve their work processes is a promising approach for triggering the initially described potential inherent in teams.

c) Reflection workshop against complaining: towards more positive participation

When the organizational environment is designed in a way that gives autonomy and responsibility to the teams, but they do not use this freedom in terms of improving their work where possible, a team trainer or consultant may help. In an ongoing longitudinal study, we have conducted a workshop with each of the 54 teams involved that was designed to foster the positive aspect of self competence. The constituting criteria “interest in change”, “personal responsibility”, and “planning of measures” have been demonstrated to have a strong positive impact on team-level and organizational outcomes (cf. Kauffeld, 2006b). The workshops started out with an exercise that shows the benefits of teamwork over individual work units. Next was an assessment of the team’s current situation: (1) What is going well in our work? (2) What isn’t working/where do we have problems? And (3) Where and how do we want to improve?

This assessment was followed by in-depth discussions that were aimed at pointing out ways in which the teams themselves can make a difference in their work (rather than waiting for supervisors or other departments to make a change, for example). We also included some simple team-building exercises to enhance the team climate.

Over time, we found a significant positive impact of these workshops on the self competence of the teams involved. That is, in group discussions some months after the workshops, teams who participated in the workshops were voicing more interest in change, were taking more personal responsibility for the solutions they discussed, and were planning more measures than those teams who did not receive a workshop¹. Likewise, teams who participated in a workshop were showing significantly less negative remarks concerning participation after the workshop (cf. Neining & Kauffeld, in press).

These preliminary findings demonstrate that it is indeed possible to address dysfunctional communication in teams by team consultation. Future research will show whether the effects we found can hold in a follow-up design.

d) Team coaching with act4teams as a continuous process

How can team members be sensitized to complaining circles and the chance to break these with structuring statements? While team members are probably not too excited about looking into methods such as sequence analysis, we have made good experiences with examples taken from group discussions such as the two examples described above. Team members usually benefit from such examples if they are close enough to their own discussion. They are then presented with a good starting point for reflecting about their own interaction processes. It can also be useful to present the findings by Kauffeld (2006b) as depicted in Table 2. These results underline the fact that it *does* matter a great deal what goes on in a group discussion and what the team members make of their ideas and solutions afterwards. The sensitization for the importance of these processes could be implemented as part of the standard group facilitator training in companies, or it could be included in team-building workshops. In any case, it should be considered that teams as a whole need to be sensitized towards these processes. If, for example, only the team leader receives this knowledge, there will probably very little acceptance in the team for insights about complaining circles as dysfunctional interaction. Moreover, when educating a team about these negative communication patterns, it should be made very clear that these occur in all kinds of groups, and at all levels of an organization rather than leaving them with a feeling of being picked out for bad communication. Finally, successful team coaching requires a continuous process. In the context of interaction, this should involve an initial interaction assessment, subsequent reflection and optimization periods, and process and result evaluations with *act4teams*.

¹ We used a pilot group – waiting group design. Teams who functioned as waiting group during the first phase of the study received a workshop in the second phase.

All these measures are aimed at helping a team get out of the “complaining loop” and turn to solution-oriented interaction instead. This does not mean that complaining should be prohibited per se. Complaining may be useful at the beginning of team interventions or change processes, for example, to give everyone a chance to “vent”. However, team members should then commit themselves to the convention that complaining is out of place in optimization discussions. When team members succeed to make this shift to solution orientation, they can rise to their full potential of tackling their problems, optimizing their work processes, and being more productive and innovative than any individual alone.

Key terms

Advanced Interaction Analysis (*act4teams*):

An instrument based on process analysis for coding group discussions. Individual remarks or sense units are classified by one of the comprehensive 44 categories. Discussions can be analyzed concerning positive and negative interaction. Research has linked assessments of discussions with *act4teams* to outcomes such as satisfaction, applicability of generated solutions, productivity, and corporate innovation.

Complaining circles:

A pattern of complaining and support statements commonly found in group discussions. Complaining circles may be understood as a negative group mood. They have a strong negative impact on the discussion outcome and group member satisfaction. Moreover, they diminish team-level and organizational success in the long run.

Emotional contagion:

In group research, a process in which one group member's mood, expressed through interaction, "wears off" on other group members. These others adopt the initial mood unconsciously or via conscious comparison processes, and follow with similar remarks. Emotional contagion can explain the development of complaining circles.

Group mood:

Synchronized moods of individuals. Group mood can emerge through verbal interaction between group members. The underlying process is emotional contagion.

Sequence analysis:

A statistical procedure to calculate transition probabilities between different events. In group interaction, sequence analysis can be used to determine whether certain communication patterns such as complaining circles occur significantly above chance.

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