



COMPLAINT HANDLING - 5 QUICK TIPS

1. *Show respect*

A large part of your role as an academic administrator is to help others address and resolve interpersonal conflicts, managerial challenges, and instances of poor communication. By showing respect to each person involved in these workplace disputes, you model the kind of behavior that you hope each of them will adopt. And that will go a long way toward creating a more harmonious workplace.

2. *Put your visitor at ease*

When someone approaches you with a complaint or concern, your first and best step is to put your visitor at ease. Welcome the visitor into your office, and make sure he or she is comfortable. Let your visitor begin the conversation. You can expect the visitor to be anxious, confused, upset, or even angry. The more that you can control your own emotions, the better you will be at engaging your visitor.

3. *Engage in active listening*

Your primary role is to listen. This does not mean you can sit back passively hoping that your visitor will tell you everything that you need to know. Rather, you will need to demonstrate that you are authentically trying to understand the contents of the problem or issue as well as its emotional context. If your mind starts to wander, and if you appear disinterested, your visitor will conclude that you are either unable or unwilling to provide assistance.

Here are some of the basic techniques of active listening:

- Ask open-ended questions to understand. Open-ended questions can't be answered with a simple "yes" or "no." Open-ended questions might start with "why" or "how." Here are some examples: How did this problem arise? What happened next? Why do you think you received this kind of reaction?
- Ask close-ended questions to confirm what you have heard. These questions can be answered with a "yes" or "no." When you ask a close-ended question, you are able to validate—in summary fashion—what it is that you have heard. You are not agreeing or disagreeing with what you heard. Rather, you can use a close-ended question to confirm what it is you have heard. Once you have heard your visitor's concerns, provide a short summary, and then ask, "Have I captured your major points, here?"

4. *Take notes*

It is always a good idea to take notes, first explaining to your visitor what you are doing and why. Note taking helps you recall the major points of the problem. Notes can help you identify what aspects of the problem are important in the narrative presented. Your notes should cover what is said to you and not include your comments or judgments about the concerns shared with you. When you ask a closed-ended question to confirm what you have heard, your notes will help you quickly summarize the main points.

5. *Set time boundaries and explain the next steps*

From the perspective of your visitor—whether an employee or colleague—the problem or complaint can feel enormously complex, difficult, and perhaps even overwhelming. When you set time boundaries, you explain the next steps and provide a framework for how the problem will be addressed. Typical next steps include speaking to the other people who know about the issue, reviewing relevant materials, and researching the university's rules and regulations. When you do what you said you would do and within the time frames you established, you provide a structure for resolving the issue. With an agreed structure for tackling a tough problem, the complaint no longer seems unsolvable.

