

# Dealing with complaints inside the office

COMMUNICATION

LEVEL  
Upper-intermediate

NUMBER  
EN\_BE\_3125X

LANGUAGE  
English

lingoda





## Goals

- Can understand new typical words and phrases for dealing with complaints
- Can read a complaint and discuss how to best solve problems with a colleague







## Preview and warm-up

- Complaints are **inevitable** when people work together. In most offices, someone in **human resources**, **management** or **administration** helps employees discuss and deal with complaints related to office life.



Today we'll talk about different types of **complaints**, what causes them and how they might be **handled**.



## Discuss

**What sort of problems can arise within an office?**





## Making a complaint heard

- When an employee has a problem, they may decide to ask for help fixing it.
- The steps for **registering a complaint** at work are outlined below.

■ An individual or group of employees decides they have a problem.

■ Either **in person** or **in writing**, they ask a colleague in human resources or management to **handle their complaint**.

■ Some sort of **combination** of employees, HR and management try to **sort out the issue**.

- Problems may range from **minor irritations** to **major disciplinary issues**.
- Solving problems may therefore involve **informal discussions** or a serious, **formal investigation**.



## Human resources

- Most offices have a **human resources** or **personnel department** that handles **internal office affairs**.
- They make sure the workplace is **well-functioning, productive** and **satisfying**.

- **HR duties** might include:
  - **hiring** and **onboarding** new employees
  - handling office **complaints**
  - planning office **team-building activities**
  - **investigating** workplace issues
  - **terminating** the contracts of employees who are not a good fit





## Responding to complaints

- HR professionals are **well-equipped** with tools – and vocabulary – to handle all sorts of workplace issues.
- When another employee **reports a problem**, they need to be able to help them **sort it out**.

When faced with a complaint, I can...	For example:
deal with something informally	sending a reminder e-mail about keeping the office kitchen clean
deal with something formally	setting up a mediation session between a manager and an employee
look into something	investigating a complaint by talking to other employees
make it a priority	focusing on a crucial issue for as much time as it takes





## An HR manager responds to a complaint

**formal  
complaint**

**deal with  
complain in  
writing**



**sort out**

**register**

**look into**

Diana, I've never done this before, but I want to \_\_\_\_\_ a complaint about Patrick. Are you free right now?

Sure. It isn't serious enough to \_\_\_\_\_.  
Patrick has this room spray or scented candle that drives me crazy.

Thank you. What if he doesn't agree though? I don't really want to make a \_\_\_\_\_.

Great. Thank you for helping me \_\_\_\_\_ this.

No need to be worried. Can you tell me what's going on so we can \_\_\_\_\_ your issue?

I've noticed that too. Well, perhaps you could chat with him about it. You could say: Patrick, I'm sensitive to certain scents.

If he doesn't agree to get rid of it, I'll step in and \_\_\_\_\_ the issue further.



## Finding the right words

**Have you ever talked  
to a colleague about  
an issue or complaint  
at work?**



**What skills and  
strategies should people  
keep in mind when  
bringing up issues with  
colleagues?**



## What's bothering you?

- There are many different types of workplace **disputes**.
- The chart below shows some common workplace issues.

common workplace issues
issues with salary, benefits and leave
conflicts between colleagues
performance issues
misunderstandings between managers and employees
abuse of power by those higher up





## Workplace issues



**Can you think of  
any other issues  
that might  
occur in the  
workplace?**



## Formal or informal complaint?

- How do you decide how serious a complaint is?

- **Informal complaints** tend to deal with **minor conflicts, issues** or **behaviours** that can be addressed relatively easily.

- **Formal complaints** deal with things that may harm employees or their work, like **discrimination, bullying, harassment** and **poor performance**.



- Regardless of your issue, talking with HR will help you **figure out** your next steps.
- Will there be a **formal disciplinary process** or **investigation**?



## Sorting out a problem

### coaching

A manager who has good intentions but an abrasive management style may benefit from **coaching** to improve their methods of management.

### mediation

Someone in HR or office management may offer to **mediate** a dispute i.e. facilitating a discussion with the aim of finding a solution to a problem.

### counselling

**Counselling** can help you to recognise and deal with problems, such as underperformance.

### disciplinary action

**Disciplinary action** might range from having a note put in a file to putting an employee on probation.

### dismissal

If all else fails, or if an employee has committed a serious offence, they may be **dismissed** from their position.



## Dealing with diverse workplace complaints

**Four employees have brought complaints to your attention.  
Which do you think require a formal response and which can be  
handled informally?**

Jean called in sick, but I'm pretty sure she's at the beach.

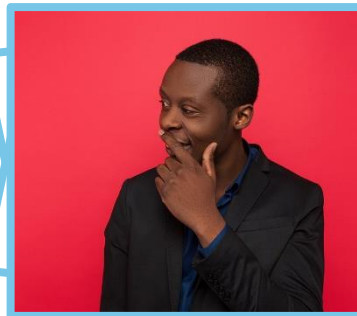


**Martina**

Louisa treats me like her assistant. She asked me to pick up her dry cleaning!



**Alfred**



**Muhammad**

I cannot ride with Geoff anymore to client meetings. He is such a bad driver!



**Magda**

John won't add me to important e-mails and doesn't ask me to present. I think it's sexist.



## Finding solutions

**Pick one of the problems on the previous slides and describe how you would resolve it.**

Who would be involved?

How would you gather information?







## Formal or informal solutions

**What are the pros and cons of handling a problem informally?**





## Making a complaint in writing

- When you're faced with a particularly bad workplace issue, such as **harassment**, **discrimination** or **poor employee performance**, it is recommended that all incidents are **documented**.
- Going to HR with a record of the issue can help you **find a solution** more easily.
- The boxes below show examples of how a manager might document behaviour.

### 21<sup>st</sup> February

- Katrina was asked to give a presentation on the Edinburgh branch office at this morning's meeting. She was given the assignment on 15<sup>th</sup> February (see attached e-mail). She was unprepared for the presentation and could not provide basic information about the branch.

### 1<sup>st</sup> March

- Katrina arrived 25 minutes late to work without explanation – did not call ahead. She was not aware of client meeting at 10.00 a.m., leaving client waiting in lobby. Katrina was reminded of this meeting by e-mail on 28<sup>th</sup> February (see attached e-mail).



## Example written complaint (1/2)

**Read through this sample of a formal report submitted regarding an employee's poor performance and high absence level.**

I am writing this letter to lodge a complaint regarding my direct supervisee, Katrina Calvin. Although Katrina is a pleasant employee, her performance over the past quarter has declined and her high absence level has strained our department.

I have spoken to Ms Calvin about her absences and tardiness, but there has been limited improvement. In January, she missed three days without explanation and was late on five occasions. In February she missed one day of work and was more than 30 minutes late on six occasions.

Additionally, Ms Calvin has been unprepared for presentations and failed to submit necessary sections of reports. In one instance, this resulted in our team being penalised for a late budget submission.

The report offers **clear** and **concrete** examples of the **unacceptable** behaviour.



## Example written complaint (2/2)

I would like to bring this to HR's attention in order to find a solution to this ongoing problem. I would like to assist Ms Calvin in improving her performance.

You'll find documentation of the unexplained absences as well as documentation of missed deadlines in the enclosed file.

Regards,  
Esther Clarke

Note that the report is **solution focused**.





## HR handles a complaint

- Imagine that two employees have complained about their boss making them do too much overtime.
- Below are some examples of how an HR representative might respond.

I'll definitely look into this. Have you documented the times you've worked over your usual hours?

I can tell you're both fed up, so I'll make this a top priority. We'll try to deal with this ASAP.

I'm afraid that, as salaried employees, some overtime is to be expected.

Would you be open to having a mediated discussion with your boss?



It is important for an HR representative to **offer solutions** while also remaining **neutral**.



## Responding to a written complaint

**You are an HR representative and receive the e-mail on p. 19 and 20 about Katrina Calvin's performance.**

**It's now up to you to decide what to do next.**



1

Read and summarise the e-mail.

2

Come up with three questions you have for Katrina and her supervisor.

3

Consider at least two ways to find a solution to this problem.



## Useful and appropriate questions

**Which of the questions below would be useful for finding a solution to the problem? Which can be considered inappropriate or unhelpful?**

a. Have you documented the problem?

b. Have you heard some rumours about what's going on?

c. Are you aware of anything happening in her personal life?

d. How has her work performance impacted your team?

e. Is Katrina a lazy employee?

f. When did the problems first begin?

g. If we fired her, would she be angry or sue us?

h. Do you like her?

appropriate

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inappropriate

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## Respond to the e-mail

**Now that you have reflected on Esther's e-mail, write a response to her suggesting next steps.**

**Be sure to include any questions you may have about the situation.**

— □ ×

To: estherclarke@work.com

Subject: Your written complaint

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## Finding a way to move forward

**How would you handle the situation with Katrina? Consider the two different approaches below and discuss the advantages and disadvantages with your teacher or classmates.**

**Can you agree on a strategy?**

I think we need a hard approach – set an example!



We need to be collaborative in our approach.

**Discipline – and maybe firing – is the right approach. We need employees we can rely on.**

**We need to figure out what's going on. We should support her and do what we can to help her be a better employee.**



## Reflect on the goals

Go back to the second slide of the lesson and check if you have achieved all the goals of the lesson.

yes

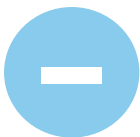
no





## Reflect on this lesson

Think about everything you have seen in this lesson.  
What were the most difficult activities or words? The easiest?



If you have time, go over  
the most difficult slides again



## Answer key

**Exercise p. 9**  
register, sort out, complain in writing, formal complaint, look into, deal with

**Exercise p. 23**  
Appropriate: a, c, d, f  
Inappropriate: b, e, h, g





## Identify the missing word or phrase

1. Julie, there seems to \_\_\_\_\_ in approving my leave request. My manager said it was no problem for me to go on holiday that week, but your HR assistant just e-mailed me to say I can't go.

- a. have been an error      b. have registered a complaint      c. have a priority      d. have been discrimination

2. Hmmm... I'll \_\_\_\_\_! I'm sorry to cause you stress. However, that is quite a busy week and several other employees put their requests in before you.

- a. open a formal investigation      b. complain about this      c. look into this      d. register a complaint to HR

3. Sorry but I'm \_\_\_\_\_ with that answer. Richard said that my holiday was guaranteed that week. How did this happen?

- a. finding a solution      b. fully satisfied      c. handling      d. not satisfied

4. Richard may not have submitted your form on time. We'll \_\_\_\_\_ this issue as best as we can.

- a. resolve      b. register      c. complain about      d. dismiss



## What would you do?

**Your boss forgot to turn in your holiday request to HR in a timely fashion and now your request has been denied. You're desperate for a holiday and mad at your boss.  
Make some notes on how you would handle this problem.**

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## Homework answer key

**Exercise p. 30**  
1a, 2c, 3d, 4a





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