

Don't Faint at Complaints: How Negative Feedback Can Enhance Your Reputation



By

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"The only real mistake is the one from which we learn nothing." —Henry Ford

Rumors and false information can move at the speed of a digital virus. One false allegation can ripple through social media in minutes, and a single misunderstood statement can become a Hydra head, turning faithful supporters into outraged opponents—not to mention trolls looking to capitalize on your misfortune with a proxy war of their own. It's no wonder nonprofit organizations are feeling a heightened sense of insecurity and anxiety about reputation issues.

As rumor, innuendo, and falsely reported information spread, NRMC has seen reputation risks become the top risk concern for many nonprofit leaders. Even leaders who feel relatively prepared to respond to a false claim are frequently fearful of secondary effects such as frivolous lawsuits, donor decline, or simply the ricochet effect of time and attention long after an initial event. Mapping out all the possible preventions and repercussions of reputation harm can be overwhelming, leaving nonprofits wondering where to turn.

In our experience, one of the best places to begin is also one of the most frequently overlooked: the complaints (and comments) you receive. Revisiting your approach to complaints is a great way to make big headway in reducing reputation risks without a big budget investment. Complaints from inside and outside the organization are a tremendous indicator of how your reputation is fairing, and the best part is, they're delivered free of charge. How your organization responds to complaints is just as telling. Each complaint is a small case study in how your team members and organization as a whole deal creatively, constructively, and concisely with criticism.

Improving your feedback and complaints management systems sets a solid foundation for any reputation battles you may face. Below are five steps to get you started:

Step 1: Redefine Complaints as Gifts

When we are under attack it's natural to jump into defense mode, but seeing a complaint as a tool for betterment is essential if you're to learn from them. Janelle Barlow and Claus Møller dive into this concept in their book *A Complaint Is A Gift*. The authors recommend that you receive complaints just as you would receive any other gift—even if you don't like it, put on a smile, appreciate the gesture, and give thanks. Just like an ill-fitting or badly timed gift, a complaint may show how little the complainer understands about who you are, or they may be completely misinformed about your mission, or perhaps, they don't care about 90% of what you do. That said, it's still a gift. Likewise, a complaint is valuable information. If you can get past the sting and begin decoding the meaning of what you've received, you may improve and even fortify your reputation.

Step 2: Be Self-Reflexive

How adept are you at receiving complaints? Ask a friend or trusted colleague for an honest review of your personal complaint-receiving skills. Do you truly receive complaints, comments, and suggestions as helpful hints? Perhaps you are unsure because you rarely receive complaints or critical feedback. If your team never shares their complaints, it may be because you are not quite as humble and welcoming as you think.

In their book *Rethinking Reputation Risk*, [Anthony Fitzsimmons](#) and [Derek Atkins](#) write, “Your reputation is the sum total of how your stakeholders perceive you.” They remind readers, “Without stakeholders you could have no reputation, only self-esteem.” Handling complaints gracefully as an organization requires serious doses of humility and confidence, traits that trickle down from leadership. This is why it’s essential that you demonstrate your complaint-handling skills on a personal level first. Prove to your team that you handle complaints well by showing them how it is done on a daily basis. A humble attitude will spread quickly if it starts with you.

Step 3: Implement a Reporting Process to Reflect Your Complaint Values

Stating, “complaints are welcome” will fall flat if there is no easy way for complaints to be heard. Take a look at how you can build a reporting structure that ushers complaints into your systems and gives them an ear at appropriate levels of management. Are complaints arriving from outside the organization dismissed quickly, or are they documented and passed on internally so that they can be included in strategic decisions? Do you have a procedure for your team to give anonymous complaints or praise internally? Are the collected complaints given time on the agenda for staff or board meetings? New practical avenues for complaints could come in many forms:

1. Add a notice in the footer of emails that feedback is welcome, and the best way to provide it.
2. Suggest scripts for those answering the phones to inform callers of how their complaint can be logged and heard internally.
3. Add a public-facing policy explaining how complaints are handled and why.
4. Conduct a survey of your team to gauge how your organization and leaders perform when it comes to complaints.
5. Update staff job descriptions to include complaint handling responsibilities.
6. Include complaint policies in new hire or new volunteer training materials.

Keep in mind, useful feedback is not always clearly labeled as a “complaint.” Watch out for complaints or suggestions hidden in otherwise positive reviews, online forums, comments to your posts, and requests for help or better service. Internally, complaints won’t always be written out formally either; listen for complaints in the form of an offhand comment in the hall, a statement in a staff meeting, or a sentiment in an email. Encouraging complaints means encouraging those with negative feedback to speak up, and then demonstrating ways to make their ideas and feelings heard.

How your complaints are documented and handled day-to-day will look different at every organization; whatever steps you take, be sure that the way complaints are processed is manageable and is likely to strengthen your culture and mission.

Step 4: Integrate Active Listening Principles

Coined in the 1950s by psychologists Carl Rogers and Richard Farson, the term “active listening” is the practice of listening in a way that reassures the speaker that you are hearing and empathizing with what they are saying. Active listening has become a staple of good leadership, and the principles are a great reminder of how much work it can be to listen *well* to feedback, whether it be a complaint or a compliment. According to the Center for Creative Leadership, active listening in a business setting should incorporate six skills:

1. *Paying attention* – Make sure to really understand what is being said.
2. *Withholding judgment* – Assume that the person speaking has legitimate points, and suspend the impulse to judge until *after* everything has been heard.
3. *Reflecting* – Take time to reflect on what was said. Sometimes our initial impressions will change.
4. *Clarifying* – Ask clarifying questions. This lets the person providing feedback know that you understand what is being said and indicates that you are interested in understanding fully.
5. *Summarizing* – Find ways to restate what you’re hearing in your own words to let others know that you’ve really internalized their comment.
6. *Sharing* – Providing your own thoughts, feelings, and commentary is the *last* step of the process. Be sure to share in a way that continues to affirm that you actively listened.

Step 5: Self-Evaluate and Continually Strive to Improve

How you handle complaints will, of course, be a work in progress; one shouldn't have to gut check their doubt each and every moment, but outside criticism should be checked on regularly. To keep tabs on how your culture is evolving, and to welcome complaints as the assets they are, you may want to implement habitual "checkups." You can do this by:

1. Include questions about complaints in regular employee surveys, such as: What do you do if you hear a complaint and want to pass it on? Are complaints welcomed by your immediate manager? How would you describe our organization's culture when it comes to complaints and other feedback?
2. Solicit feedback from those who submitted formal complaints. Ask: Was the issue resolved, and do they feel they were treated fairly?
3. Janelle Barlow defines a complaint as "an expectation that has not been met," so bear in mind that it is often a case of changing expectations, rather than performance.

As you evaluate the results, keep in mind that fewer complaints don't necessarily mean that your customer service is improving. It may be that patrons, volunteers, and staff are no longer aware of how to air their complaints, or that reporting complaints has become inconvenient, or that no one believes feedback will be heard.

How you handle a complaint is often the best evidence of your character, and the strength of your systems. The best defense is a confident humility, knowing that you're ready to hear what is said and respond with the empathy and compassion that makes sense with your mission. Taking on a listening ear and using complaints for good is a huge stride in this direction. Capitalizing on complaints by decoding and embracing the lessons of criticism is an inexpensive path to a better reputation.

For more knowledge on this important topic, NRMC recommends the following books:

- *A Complaint Is a Gift: Using Customer Feedback as a Strategic Tool*, by Janelle Barlow and Claus Møller
- *The Fearless Organization: Creating Psychological Safety in the Workplace for Learning, Innovation, and Growth*, by Amy Edmondson
- *Rethinking Reputational Risk: How to Manage the Risks that can Ruin Your Business, Your Reputation and You*, by Anthony Fitzsimmons and Derek Atkins