



Consultants should refrain from complaining about their firm in front of clients

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Years ago, when I worked for a large consulting firm, one of my coworkers was venting about some disagreements he was having with his manager. The discussion then escalated into things he did not like about the entire company. Finally, as he realized he might be coming across to me as a complainer, he said, "Tom, it is everyone's God-given right to complain about the company they work for."

He may have been right. And as a manager, I usually liked to listen to people's complaints. Sometimes, there were things I could do to improve the situation. Even if there was nothing I could do, just the act of being available and listening was often all the person wanted. I always felt it was better to have people complain directly to me so I knew what was going on. It was frustrating to hear vague comments that people were complaining but not know who or why.

Yes, everyone has a right to complain. However, like all rights, this one is not absolute. It's one thing to work for a regular company and complain about something to your coworkers. But if you're a consultant, you shouldn't complain about your company in front of a client.

First, try not to be a complainer

Let's start with the obvious: It doesn't pay to be a complainer. Everyone knows that no company is perfect, and it is not unusual to run across situations or policies that might not be as employee-friendly as they could be. In many cases, people seek comfort by sharing the situation with a colleague, usually to get a sympathetic ear. The hope is that the colleague will understand and agree and perhaps come back with a similar story. This is truly an instance of "misery loves company."

A person might also talk with a colleague to get a different opinion about a situation. The colleague may say the complaint is off base, point out that everyone has the same rules, or perhaps suggest ideas on how to address the situation.

I think everyone has a reason to complain about specific things once in awhile, but some people complain about everything: The company is bad, management is no good, the job stinks, etc. These employees get the reputation of being complainers, and then most people stop taking their complaints seriously.

Consultants have a different set of rules

There is a different standard when it comes to consultants and contractors. You have to be careful what you say and to whom so that you don't damage your company or your own job. Consultants complain for the same reasons that regular employees do. Since you work with clients every day and feel comfortable around them, sometimes there is a tendency to confide in them as well.

This is not just something confined to young consultants or those with small firms. When I worked for a large beverage company, we used quite a few consultants from a then-Big-6 consulting firm. We were paying some of these people hundreds of dollars an hour. However, after awhile, I started to become familiar with their branch office politics and their business situation. Consultants would complain to me about their managers, their company policies, how bad business was, and other things that I really didn't care about.

It is true that some people attract complainers like a magnet, but I generally never gave them sympathy or much of a response beyond "that's too bad." Each time I heard a complaint, I thought a little less of the person and the consulting company.

There is a perception that Big 5 consultants are worth more money. However, I began to seriously question the money we were paying for the consultants as I realized that they were not very mature in how they conducted themselves, and they did not have as much common sense as I would have expected regarding the information they shared with a client.

Complaining to a client typically causes nothing but harm

The only purpose of complaining to a client is to try to get a sympathetic reaction. Unlike complaining to a colleague, a client is rarely going to be in a position to help, and they are not normally going to want to get involved from the standpoint of suggesting alternatives. On the other hand, a lot of negatives can occur:

- **Loss of prestige.** Just as in my previous example, a consultant who complains to the client instantly loses some personal prestige. Most of the company employees don't want to hear about it anyway. Managers, especially, will start to question a consultant's judgment. I know I did. Fair or not, I know of more than one consultant I mentally labeled as a complainer.
- **Loss of business.** Consultants who complain to the client can also negatively influence the client's perception of the entire consulting company. This is particularly true if more than one person from the same company is complaining. When it comes time to staff another consulting position, these managers may well look for other options for obtaining consultants. Even if it is not obvious, they could be building up mental prejudices against candidates from certain companies. Again, from my perspective, I can tolerate employee complainers up to a point. However, I don't have that same tolerance for consultant complainers, and usually they were not extended when their original assignment was over.
- **Loss of a job.** Most consulting firms won't put up with having their consultants make derogatory remarks to their client. Complaints can result in consultants coming off projects earlier than they might have, and it can potentially result in lost business for the consulting company. If your company hears about instances where you complain in front of the client, you could be subject to immediate dismissal.

Exercise restraint

As a consultant, you simply cannot complain or bad-mouth your company in front of a client. The client is not in a position to help, and any reaction you get will usually be a negative one. You'll lose personal prestige, since clients will wonder why you don't have the common sense to know that you shouldn't complain in front of them.

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