

So Much More Power Than We Think We Have

Robert F. Moran Jr.

Time to take a look at the TV news. Click, the television picture begins to take shape. Suddenly in front of me is a closeup of a fellow hollering at me. Not again! I don't need this; there are enough people who complain to me face to face. He is complaining about the failure of state police to keep unsafe trucks off the roads. His cause is worthwhile, but does he have to holler? What good is this complaining going to do? Complaining results in getting one's way sometimes, but not frequently. But complaining certainly is frequent, and when one's frustration in failing to have one's way gets overwhelming, the level and frequency of the complaint rises.

Complaining is part of the human condition. So often things of importance are beyond our control and efforts to get control are unsuccessful. Sometimes emotions build and heated words erupt. More frequently, complaining allows us to relieve some of the frustration and then we are able to find a way to put up with our disappointment.

Work experience confirms the frequency of complaining. "What does he think we are, super people?" Or, "She always says one thing and does another!" Or again, "Why did *they* get the extra staff? We need it more if we are to do all he expects us to do!" Or, "They should not have chosen that system; we are the ones who have to make it work and we know it won't work here. I don't care whether it is cheaper; it is the wrong system for this library!"

What a shame! Complaining is such a waste. It is a waste of time, it can lead to hurt feelings and barriers among staff, and energy that could be used for valuable activities is spent. Perhaps of most importance, when complaining is followed by just putting up with the disappointment, creative energy is inhibited and the best solution lost. But what is the choice, what else is there to do? Most things are out of our control so in the end complaining is all that is available.

We aren't as powerless as we think. Although it frequently appears that making a change or otherwise influencing an issue of importance at work is beyond our control, finding the power for making a change can be as easy or as difficult as changing the way we think.

An example: The director of a public library has just left a meeting with the children's and adolescent services librarians. She explained that she has agreed to a request from the public school superintendent to begin regular library classes for all the students at the middle school because recent budget reductions forced the layoff of all media teachers. In answer to the obvious question from the librarians, she responded that no additional staff will be available. The school district will provide funds for school materials such as notebooks and art materials, but no other new funds will be provided. Money for book purchases will come from the library materials budget.

When the door closes behind the director, there is an uneasy silence with several still present looking aghast. This is ridiculous. The department is already having difficulty staffing for all expected programming. The first comments are, "What does she think we are, magicians?" From another, "This is typical; when the reference department doubled the senior computer classes, its hourly staff was increased so it could hire part-time computer teachers." The department head holds up her hands and says, "OK, complaining is not going to help; let's have some ideas." After a half an hour of discussion and more complaints, she summarizes, "There is no one here who can take responsibility for the new program without giving up existing programming that parents and teens expect. The low enrollment Thursday children's hour could be cancelled with only a few unhappy families, but this is contrary to published policy and would not free enough of us to teach the required number of classes. I must tell the director that we will not be able to undertake this new program unless she gives us a budget for it—I hope this doesn't mean a bad evaluation in my file." As the group leaves the room, more than one person articulated the complaint, "Why do we have to do this? We are the only people she treats as though we aren't already doing as much as we can." An understandable complaint. However, it could be that the director is treating these librarians as professionals.

Straight-Line Thinking

The scene described is one of straight-line thinking. That is, when a new assignment is made, resources to accomplish it



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are expected from the administration. If they are not forthcoming, the staff claims the new assignment can't be done, or more frequently, it is undertaken reluctantly and done poorly with a simultaneous reduction in the effectiveness of other assignments. A straight line—the amount of work that can be done is related to the size of the budget provided. If new work is assigned, the automatic response is that more funds must be provided or some existing funds must be reallocated. It is not at all surprising that when we are at work we think in this limited manner. Effects of the traditional hierarchical structure of libraries remain with us even in those libraries moving to more effective structures. The hierarchy treated staff as cogs in a machine. Those in charge said, "Here is your role (position description); here are the resources you need (time, training, technology, and so on); here are your orders (hierarchical authority). If you have questions, ask the authority above you. Suggestions are not welcome."

There are other ways of thinking. Rather than limiting the search for resources for a new responsibility to insistence on more funds or staff, look elsewhere. What other relationships exist with the new assignment such as a requirement to provide media instruction to middle school students? The students, teachers, other library staff, the school board, parents, the school principal, middle school media vendors, high school media teachers, and so on! The development of a program of media instruction which seems so impossible when the solution is sought in the limited straight-line thinking demonstrated above becomes more likely when thought of in a broader context. Would teachers be willing to structure assignments in a way to minimize the time required from the library instructor? Would the PTA be willing to provide money from its fund-raising for books? Will the principal investigate whether computer-assisted library instruction will meet state requirements? How would the library director respond to a request for a limited increase in funding for a plan which takes advantage of teacher, family, and school expertise and available resources?

Everything we deal with at work is part of a system much larger than is immediately obvious. Even those of us who think more broadly than previously described can increase the number of relationships we identify as sources for help in solving a problem. While doing so does not guarantee a solution, it is certainly better than complaining. One of the many benefits of systems thinking is that it empowers staff who otherwise see themselves as powerless. Most of us would prefer to walk out of the meeting described earlier, preparing to ask a middle school teacher with whom one is personally acquainted to discuss the proposal for media instruction.

In addition, systems thinking reveals points of real leverage. So many times when looking for a solution to a

problem at work, we end up asking for more funds. But leverage with regard to getting more money is minimal if not nonexistent. The budget is always less than needed and the power one person or department has for forcing a reallocation is next to none in most cases. However, broader thinking reveals points at which real power exists or can be accumulated. A department with a plan that shows broad involvement, outside resources, and a limited request for new funding has accumulated leverage for change—in this case, budget allocation. In addition, it can happen that a broader involvement of affected people could uncover a source of leverage for major change. What if discussions with families uncovered a significant shared dissatisfaction with the lack of school media instructors, dissatisfaction at a level sufficient to power an organized complaint to the school board? This would be substantial leverage.

People complain when they feel powerless. It is easy and gives an immediate positive feeling. We did something! We have expressed our anger and frustration. When dissatisfaction leads to confrontation with a person in power, complaining is even more satisfying; with pretended power we tell him that he had better act differently. But the satisfaction is short-lived. Systems thinking is harder, but satisfaction deeper and more long-lasting. Using one's intelligence and imagination to find where there is power and focusing that power on the situation is preferable to complaining. Systems thinking allows us to discover that we are not as powerless as we thought.

A Mantra for Leaders

A frequent comment from a chancellor of a university I worked for was "take responsibility." He was an advocate of systems thinking and sought to introduce it into the culture of the university, its faculty, and its administration. It was clear that what he meant was, "Don't look to me for solutions to problems in your unit; don't complain that you must have more money or attention. You're in charge of your unit; you are in charge of your job. Take the responsibility; find a solution yourself. You have the means to do so if you only broaden your thinking."

Take responsibility—a mantra for leaders in the twenty-first century? I think so. Of course, the leader must have created an open organization in which all staff understand and are committed to the library's goals, decision-making is distributed, broad thinking is encouraged, recommendations from staff welcomed, analyzed, and thoroughly discussed with the recommenders, and risk-taking rewarded or at least tolerated.