

Chapter 1

Whiners



Help Me Across

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|-----------------|---------------------|
| ⚡ Martyrs | ⚡ Pouters |
| ⚡ Spoiled brats | ⚡ Soap opera actors |
| ⚡ Dark clouds | ⚡ Weeds/exploders |

Spot a Whiner

Whiners remind you of holding children's hands as you walk them across a street. They want you to help guide them through life's challenges. Whiners complain to connect with others. They seek reassurance, guidance, and direction. Whiners complain to reach out and get empathy or validation from others in their community. They need constancy, support, and security.

Are You Negotiating with a Whiner?

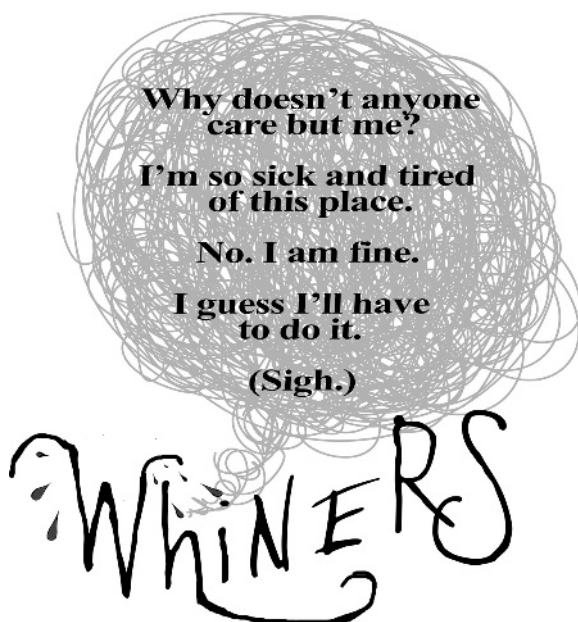
Whiners complain to form relationships and receive empathy. They vent, withdraw, and want others to solve their problems. Whiners:

- complain about how things aren't fair.
- play the victim and are powerless.
- always seem to have something wrong in their lives.
- are always upset about something or someone.
- never bring solutions, only problems.



Reactions. Whiners bring doom and gloom to the office. They are overly sensitive, withdrawn, moody, sulky, grumpy, and crabby. They are passive lamenters who pout, sigh, and moan. They repeat discussions regarding perceived offenses or slights. Whiners withdraw, hide, become quiet, and exhibit helplessness. If frustrated, they become touchy, explosive, and prone to outbursts and tantrums.

Reality. Whiners hope to be soothed, comforted, or reassured. They feel if they let others know their complaints, the issues will be addressed or solved for them. When they feel overwhelmed, ignored, or vulnerable, they explode.



Stop a Whiner



Actions that Don't Work with Whiners:

- **Giving reasons their reaction is irrational or unproductive.** Whiners are not concerned with rational outcomes or the inconsistency of their actions. They want empathy, not logic.

- **Forcing them into problem solving before they vent.** Whiners have to release their emotions and feel heard before they are open to solutions or a proactive approach. Trying to make Whiners feel better by complimenting them won't help, nor will telling them to "grow up."
- **Venting along with them or solving their problem.** Whining with them just encourages more complaining. When you provide an opinion or offer solutions, they usually reject your advice or make excuses. On the rare occasion they accept and act on your suggestion, they will blame you if the result is bad. And, if the advice works, you now become their crutch for making their future decisions.



The best way to negotiate with Whiners is to *listen, empathize, and ask for solutions.*

- **Listen.** Whiners are trying to connect and build relationships through their complaining. Seems counter-intuitive, doesn't it? Spending a few minutes actively listening and even mirroring back what you hear from Whiners goes a long way with these relational Complainers. Note a "few" is less than 5 minutes . . . you're not their counselor.
- **Empathize.** Simple sentences such as, "That has got to be tough," "Wow, I'm glad I don't have that problem," or "I don't know how you do it," are sufficient. Also, it

may be all the empathy Whiners need. You may hear a Whiner respond, “It really isn’t that bad,” “Thanks for listening,” or “Sorry. I just needed to vent.”

- **Ask for solutions.** Ask Whiners for solutions and repeat as needed. Remember, chronic Whiners know that whining gets results. They may need several exposures to “Wow. What are you going to do about that?” before taking the hint that you aren’t the best place to deposit their problems.

How to Stop a Whiner Boss

When the Whiner is your boss, you need to listen and make sure you aren’t causing the problem and that the solution isn’t yours to fix. Like all Whiners, bosses want to feel heard and receive empathy for their problems. Sometimes they would like someone else to fix the problem, and sometimes they just want to vent. Listening can make all the difference as long as you don’t sign up as your Complainer’s professional coach, counselor, or parent. Despite the role as your leader, you still need to *listen, empathize, and ask for solutions*.

Human Beings, not Beans

Zoe works as a case manager for a nonprofit social services agency. She sat down next to Cindy, her boss, and the executive director at their annual volunteer appreciation lunch. Zoe soon regretted not finding another seat. Cindy said hello and

asked how Zoe was doing. Two seconds after Zoe replied, “Fine,” Cindy started whining:

“That must be nice. I’m not fine. You work with people and get to solve problems. You’re not stuck having to account to a board of directors for every penny. You don’t have to explain why costs are up and our donations are down again this year. It’s unbelievable. You know, we’re here to serve people who need the help. If I wanted to be a bean counter, I wouldn’t have chosen a career in social services.”



He reminds me of a whiney 2-year-old. (He’s 52.)



Zoe needs to *listen* for a few minutes. Cindy is venting. Reporting to the board is not a problem under Zoe’s control. Then, Zoe should *empathize* with Cindy’s situation. Finally, Zoe should *ask* Cindy what *solutions* she is going to try—and then *repeat* as needed.

Zoe’s response might sound like this: “Wow. All that reporting can’t be any fun, and it takes time away from your important work. What are you going to do?”

Let’s say Cindy’s response is, “Well, what can I do? I can’t just make donors give us money or stop inflation. I can’t avoid the board’s questions. I can’t ignore the finances. What can I do?!”

Zoe can repeat: “I’m sorry. Sounds like you want a change. What do you think you’re going to do?”

How to Stop a Whiner Peer

When the Whiners are your peers, you often care about them and may see others doubting their skills because of their behavior. Remember, it's not your role to tell them it's time to get past a problem or attempt to lead them. Giving solutions on how to fix the drama won't work until Whiners decide to change. On some level, Whiners attract or encourage continuing conflict. Remember to *listen, empathize, and ask for solutions*.

Soap Opera Life

Julie is a sales professional at a large hotel. Julie's life story could fill a book, but people would probably think it was fiction. After two years of Julie being at the hotel, her coworkers Janet and Tahnesha have become experts in the details of Julie's soap opera. Julie's constant complaints of an abusive husband, a child who graduated college and refuses to visit, financial woes, health challenges, mother-in-law issues, and a chronically sick cat make working with Julie exhausting. Julie's sick and vacation days are a welcome break for the hotel's sales team. Julie's latest rant was:

“Did I tell you that he's getting angrier and meaner every day? I just can't leave him. Besides, where would I go? Not everyone takes pets. He'd let Snowball die just to spite me. She's the only one who loves me. If I leave, my monster-in-law would be thrilled. She'd have her precious son to herself. But what if Chloe comes to her senses and comes home? She's only 23.”



He won't get help. He is a professional victim.



The shared feeling among the hotel staff is that daughter Chloe is the smartest family member for leaving that nuthouse. Janet and Tahnesha need to *listen* to Julie for a few minutes. Then, *empathize* with Julie's situation. They need to remember that Julie needs professional emotional guidance, not well-intentioned advice from her coworkers. Janet and Tahnesha might want to notify their human resources (HR) professional who knows the hotel's health benefits. HR may be able to point Julie toward a good resource or an employee assistance program to assist her in sorting out her issues. Finally, they need to *ask* Julie what *solutions* she has to address her problems and *repeat* as needed.

After listening for a few minutes, Janet's or Tahnesha's response might sound like this: "Wow. Julie, I don't know how you do it. I couldn't handle all the problems you have. What are you going to do now?"

If Julie says, "I just don't know. It is so hard," the response is, "Sounds like it is really hard. So how are you going to handle it?" Repeat as needed. Eventually, Julie will understand that although caring and empathy exist, there are limits.

How to Stop a Whiner Employee

When the Whiners are your direct reports, they want to feel heard and reassured that their contributions are also

important. They want their leader or a “person in power” to solve their problems. As their leader, your job is to point out areas where they contribute to the company’s success and where their behavior or performance is not adding value. Remember to *listen, empathize, and ask for solutions*.

Financial Fred

Fred works for a large national distribution company. He inadvertently received an e-mail file from the compensation group. Before realizing what the e-mail contained, Fred opened the file and saw a spreadsheet containing the salaries of several of his coworkers. Since Fred found out his coworkers’ pay is higher than his, he hasn’t been the same. Despite a strict company policy to keep pay confidential, Fred gripes about the difference to his family members, friends, other employees, and even customers. Although he could go to company-sponsored courses to improve his skills, he has chosen not to attend.



Reminds me of a child who found out that someone else got more candy, more dessert, or a bigger allowance.



Fred’s leader should *listen* for a few minutes. Then, *empathize* with Fred’s situation. Finally, he should *ask Fred what solutions* he has to address the problems and *repeat* as needed. Fred was fine with his pay until he knew others made more.

During a conversation to discuss his pay, his boss could say, “I’m so sorry, Fred. What are you going to do about making more money?”

Fred’s response might be along the lines of, “What do you mean, what can I do? You’re the boss. You could give me a raise tomorrow if you wanted.”

If so, his leader can reply, “Fred, you’re at the highest pay grade for your job description. Because of your seniority, you have more vacation than anyone else. If you want to increase your value to the company, which would also increase your pay, you need to learn new things that the company needs. You haven’t attended any of the company classes to learn anything new. What are you going to do?”



Turn to Management to Help Stop Whiners

When turning to management to help with Whiners, remember to ask and answer several questions.

How Does the Company Benefit by Helping You Negotiate with a Whiner?

Whiners bring doom and gloom to the office. They aren’t problem solvers; instead, they waste people’s time with their tales of woe and expect others to solve their problems for them. They can be overly emotional and indecisive, and they may not act when they should. All of these are good business reasons for someone in management to help you negotiate with a Whiner.

What Do You Want the Organization to Do?

If you are a peer or a direct report, you may need help with guidance, strategy formulation, or intervention. As a leader, you want HR or a senior manager to support your decision to act. Whiners can cry, pout, and throw temper tantrums. You should consider having an HR representative as you coach or counsel the Whiner in case that person becomes emotional. If not, let management and HR know that you are about to have such a conversation. Your leaders need to know that your Whiner may come to them crying or upset. Some Whiners are known to leave for the day after speaking to their boss. You want your leaders to be prepared to support your position that the whining behavior stop.

What Communication Strategies Work with Whiners?

As you plan for discussions with Whiners, remember that they want others to empathize with them. They will gripe or emotionally withdraw to get their needs met. Whiners are introverted and feeling communicators. Under extreme stress, they “blow” and throw temper tantrums. As the leader, let your Whiners know that you appreciate and care about them personally. Suggest Whiners seek training or coaching to develop their natural strengths in conflict resolution and team building and to improve coping skills in assertiveness and communications. **Remind Whiners that people want to connect with them more when they are problem solvers, not just problem suppliers.**

What Detours and Roadblocks Do You Face?

Whiners know that complaining works in getting them what they want. At times, their “helpless me” act bonds them to more powerful people who can protect them. The same companies that have no problems disciplining people for excessive absenteeism, poor performance, or rule breaking may be hesitant to discipline a Whiner because it seems they already have it so rough.



My Complainer reminds me of a beaver—always gnawing on something.



Turn Management Around

The best way to negotiate to get help with your Whiner is to show that the Whiner's choice to play a victim is hurting others' performance and wasting time. Document a Whiner's specific behavior and language, especially when other teammates are affected by that person's inaction. Remember to be detailed as well as solution-oriented in your conversations with management and HR. If you paint a clear picture of the helpless act and how a Whiner is offloading work to others and hasn't made a contribution, other leaders in your company will take notice of the whining behavior, too.



Travel Tips to Stop Whiners

Here's what you need to know before you attempt to negotiate work drama with Whiners:



Reactions. Whiners *appear* as martyrs, spoiled brats, dark clouds, and pouters. They are overly sensitive, withdrawn, moody, sulky, and crabby. If frustrated or extremely stressed, they become touchy, explosive, and prone to outbursts or tantrums. They are passive in their approach and lament, sigh, moan, act put upon, or discuss personal details of their life.

Reality. Whiners *want* you to hold their hand through life's challenges and fix their problems. Through their complaining, they are seeking reassurance, guidance, direction, and a connection to others.



It doesn't work to solve Whiners' problems, offer advice, or tell them to grow up and act like an adult.



The best way to negotiate with Whiners is to *listen, empathize, and ask for solutions.*

Listen. Give them your full attention and actively listen for a few short minutes.

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Empathize. Let Whiners know you heard them and you care by saying things such as, “Wow, that has to be tough for you” or “I don’t know how you do it.”

Ask for Solutions (and Repeat). Ask for a problem-solving approach or a solution, such as, “How will you handle that?” or “I’m glad I don’t have to deal with that. What are you going to do?” Repeat as much as needed.