



The Politics of Hope Ezone “*Helping Ordinary Citizens Become Extraordinary Public Leaders*”



Behind Every Complaint Is a Commitment

By Donna Zajonc
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Public leaders are service minded so naturally they want to do all they can to help people. I find that when public servants receive a citizen complaint they tend to do one of three things:

- Want to fix it immediately
- Tend to work overtime to please
- May take the complaint personally

Each of these three strategies can lead to burn-out and very little job satisfaction. Understanding that behind every complaint lies a commitment allows us to alter the way we listen and act on complaints.

Have you ever noticed how easy it is to fall into a complaining mood? The weather isn't sunny, or the line at the Post Office is long, or there's not a parking spot in front of the grocery store. Complaining can become a way of life. I do not like myself when I complain, or frankly, I don't care to be around others who are complaint driven.

My commitment (desire) is to have mostly sunny days, efficient systems and convenient shopping. Our commitments may not always be realistic but understanding what we really care about allows us to shift our language away from what we don't want (the complaint) to what we do want (the commitment). This shift in thinking and speaking can alter the way we live and lead.

In the private world the motto, “The customer is always right,” often guides business decisions about customer complaints. The customer gets their money back or accepts a new product. In the public world the realm of public issues are vastly more complex and it therefore may be more difficult to solve a citizen's complaint with ease.

A complaint means someone cares enough to come forward. If they didn't care we would not hear from them and may be cheated of the information they will share with us.

When we care deeply about something---enough to complain---we are committed to that “something.” The trick for public servants is to shift the conversation from what the citizen is complaining about to what they really care about. The result is you have empowered the citizen and it gives you information for action.

Have you read the ***Declaration of Independence*** lately? It is filled with complains about the actions by King George of Great Britain toward the colonies. I counted over 30 grievances listed in the document.

The genius of the Founders is that they knew exactly what they wanted and clearly stated their commitment after they listed their complaints: “Our intentions, that the united colonies, are, and ought to be free and independent states and they are absolved from all allegiances to the British Crown.” What a powerful statement of collective commitments!

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The Signers not only stated what they wanted, they declared what was at stake for them personally with this powerful last sentence: “We mutually pledge to each other our lives, our fortunes and our sacred honor.” Understanding what they *really cared about* and not just their complaints, gave the Founders power to propel them toward their vision.

Here are a few questions you may ask yourself when you get stuck in a complaining mode or to help shift citizens from complaints to commitment:

1. What is your request? This question helps the person to move from what they don't want (what they are complaining about) to what they do want. *Note: Don't be surprised if they are stumped when you ask them what their request is. Often people don't know what they want. They just know what they DON'T want or DON'T like.*
2. If you had a situation without complaints, what would it look like? Can you describe it? Often when they describe it they discover that what they are asking is out of the realm of possibility or they answer their own question. Either way it moves the conversation from complaint to commitment.
3. How would you know if your commitment or concerns were satisfied? This is another question that gives you (and the citizen) new information for action. Now you have something that you can work with rather than complaints.
4. What would satisfy you? This is a similar question but more direct. This moves the conversation to specifics rather than rambling, non-specific criticism.

These questions are intended to gently guide the conversation so new information will come forth and you have the opportunity to discover what matters most to the citizen. When listening to a citizen complaint it is important to stay focused and respectful.

Most people do not want to complain. They do so when they feel they have no other choice. Consequently their emotion may spill over. Listening without personalizing the complaint and then utilizing one of the above questions will help you and the citizen to come to a more acceptable solution.

Successful public leaders have learned how to light a torch of inspiration by speaking about what matters most (our commitments) rather than repeat a list of complaints and fears. I believe we have a duty, as public leaders, to move the public dialogue from a list of complaints to taking action on our sacred commitments.

