

Playing the Gripe Game : : How to turn grouching into a winning strategy

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“BRIGHT, ACTION-ORIENTED PEOPLE ARE MOST COMFORTABLE WHEN THEY HAVE A SENSE OF CONTROL AND DIRECTION IN THEIR LIVES. THAT’S WHY THEY MAKE SUCH GOOD PILOTS AND MECHANICS.”

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SUMMARY: *Complainers can sap the enthusiasm and teamwork—the life—out of a once-cohesive flight department. But for a manager to ignore, reject, or actively fight the griping and the griper is a losing proposition for all. The more productive approach is to see most griping for what it is—frustration by action-oriented people—and invest the complainer with the responsibility to help facilitate positive change.*

“What’s your gripe?” Sounds like a game show, doesn’t it? In fact, it is one of the most challenging games managers get to play—whether you want to or not! What are the rules? Who starts the game? How do you win? If you don’t know the answers to these questions, you and your department are sure to lose, big time!

Gripe is a game the whole flight department family can play. And, flight crew members have a reputation of taking it to its highest levels.

But, do flight crew members really complain that much? Some do. Some don’t. However, enough do that their reputation is well known. The evidence is abundant. A few examples of how commonplace griping has become include:

- Technicians get descriptions of aircraft problems from the flight crews on a “squawk” or “gripe” sheet.
- Many schedulers and dispatchers have a sign posted by their desks with the word “Whining” in a big circle with a diagonal red line through it.
- Flight attendants ask the riddle, “What is the difference between a jet engine and a pilot? Answer: The jet engine quits whining when it arrives at the airport.”

So why do some pilots gripe so much? It may be industry endemic. Aviation attracts very bright people who are action-oriented. In addition, many aviation professionals are perfectionists. As a result, they can be extremely good at identifying what is “wrong,” at least from their perspective.

Put two of these folks together for long hours in a small arena, like a cockpit or an FBO waiting room, and you have the ingredients for a great game of *Gripe*. They can use those oodles of hours to play *Gripe* over their managers’ every action and decision (or inaction or non-decision). So, you could be easy meat for these pros.



But it can be to your benefit that your people are always looking for better ways to do things. If you win the *Gripe* game you can harness the most powerful resource you have: a group of great people working together to create wonderful results.

Some managers set themselves up to lose the *Gripe* game from the beginning. They try to avoid playing the *Gripe* game in any form. They think if they ignore it, the griping will go away. Wrong! Once you have been struck with the gauntlet of a gripe a response is required. Otherwise, the griper wins in one blow. Worse yet, you lose. You lose the respect, the commitment, and the support of not only the griper, but of the whole group.

But there is a secret weapon you can use in *Gripe*. I call it Gripe Judo. A manager who has mastered Gripe Judo is able to divert the energy of the gripe into positive action on behalf of the department and its customers.

For you to be prepared to win *Gripe*, you must understand its fundamentals and know the profile of some of the players. There are several variations to the game. Let's take a look at how they differ, and how you can apply Gripe Judo to win each one.

Gripe 1.0

Dawdler Dan, manager of aviation, recently successfully ushered his flight department through dramatic startup. They established a four-aircraft operation over a three-year period. He did a great job of orchestrating the purchase and delivery of \$70 million worth of aircraft, hiring 30 professionals to fly and maintain them, and overseeing the construction of a beautiful new facility to house them all. Two years later the trouble started. The "troops" began to gripe.

The flight department's management team (Dan and two long-time friends and former co-workers) blamed the noise on the youngsters' lack of a hard work ethic. And, said the managers among themselves, the Newbies obviously didn't have the benefit of long years of exposure to a successful department's historic culture of harmonious teamwork. In other words, the Newbies were griping about the Oldies and the Oldies were griping about the Newbies. They had entered into a *Gripe* death spiral. There was only one way out: Break the cycle.

When a business or department is started or goes through dramatic change, as did Dan's, it is easy for the appointed leader to rally the troops to his or her self-defined goals and objectives. That is the power of entrepreneurial leadership. But as the staff members begin to get comfortable with the changes, they will want their own turn at the controls, too. If you, as their leader, are slow in giving them more control, the team will naturally begin to critique your decisions and performance. It is the most common and innocent version of *Gripe*. It is caused by lagging leadership.

As a leader, Dawdler Dan actually set *Gripe* into motion by not staying ahead of his people's needs for personal participation. If a group of bright people is asked only to make takeoffs equal landings, they will not be satisfied. Most aviation professionals are



highly motivated service providers. If their leader provides them with no direction, they will start promoting their own approaches and looking for support and recognition.

To say it another way, bright, action-oriented people are most comfortable when they have a sense of control and direction in their lives. That's why they make such good pilots and mechanics. On the other hand, they become terribly uncomfortable (and *Gripe*) when they feel like they are being "done to" rather than being "done with."

Dan's best defense is Gripe Judo. Phil Rickert, during his days as a Director of Aviation, used Gripe Judo very effectively. When he was presented with a gripe his reaction was not defensive. In fact, in the best tradition of Judo, he accepted the griper's energy and added to it by saying, "You know, that's a great point. I've been concerned about it, too. Could you do me a favor and take the lead on fixing that? I'll give you all the support you need to make it happen."

It worked. Most of the time the Griper became Doer. In other words, in this most benign version of the game, the griping is an indication of individual or group pent-up desire and energy. These are wonderful attributes any good manager wants within his team. The wise manager uses Gripe Judo to convert that desire and energy into productive action. He upholds his responsibility to lead and guide by keeping track of progress and letting his people play between the ditches.

Gripe 2.0

Line Captain Terrible Tom is the master of avoiding crappy trips and extra duties. Some time ago he figured out that Nice Guy Ned, his chief pilot, is conflict averse. Round One automatically went to Terrible Tom.

When Nice Guy Ned would ask Terrible Tom to take a tough trip or work on the latest update of the Flight Operations Manual, Terrible Tom dodged the bullet by ranting about how busy he was, that he had "another" dentist appointment or some other excuse du jour. When the other pilot, Co-Captain Carol, asked Nice Guy Ned about the disparity in workload (you guessed it, Terrible Tom flies about 80 percent of the load carried by the other two pilots) Ned said he would rather take an extra trip himself than argue with Terrible Tom. Round Two also goes to Terrible Tom.

As you can see, Gripe 2.0 can be insidiously disruptive. Terrible Tom started this version of the game but Nice Guy Ned is allowing it to flourish. If Nice Guy Ned continues to fold under the pressure of Terrible Tom's gripes, three things will happen:

1. Terrible Tom will only grow bolder and more demanding because he senses no limits to the power of his gripes.
2. Co-Captain Carol will lose even more respect for Nice Guy Ned. It is a very unusual for a person to work hard for someone they do not respect.
3. Nice Guy Ned will lose self-respect and, eventually, he will either fail as a manager or his resentment of Terrible Tom's behaviors will reach critical mass and he'll take some kind of radical action (usually accompanied by a great gust of energy).



Gripe Judo has a great defense against the Terrible Toms of the world. It is called the Wall of Equity. One of the basic tenets of good management and leadership is to assure equity and fairness in your actions and decisions. Perfect parity is unachievable in an imperfect world. However, if you are able to measure and mete out the good and the bad assignments on an equitable basis, there will be little room for people to gripe. And here is where Gripe Judo comes in:

Declare that equity is a norm within your flight department's work environment. Challenge your team members to come up with the metrics for measuring work pain and pleasure. If they come up with their own measurements they are more likely to accept the resulting decisions. Some of the pain and pleasure points can include:

- Trip days
- Flight hours
- Overnight stays (RONs)
- Weekends and holidays worked
- Office days
- Trips to resorts and exotic locales
- Specific extra duties, etc.
- Distribute the workload equitably, without favoritism or bias.

The great thing about the Wall of Equity is that it becomes self-regulating. Before long you will find that equity-based gripes don't even make it to your desk because the question will be settled amongst the team members by simple reference to the work record.

If the Wall of Equity sounds impractical, consider this. I grew up in a family of four children. We fought incessantly over who got what. In contrast, my wife Elaine and I instituted the Wall of Equity when our boys griped over whose turn it was to do what. We declared that Jeff, our first son, was assigned the odd calendar days and Jason, our second son, was assigned the even ones. In other words, if it was your day you got the benefit and you got the burden. As a result, the calendar (which is 98 percent equitable) determined who got to sit in the front seat or who took out the trash. When equity was assured, the griping (and the power games) stopped.

Gripe Game 3.0

Gripe 3.0 is a malicious power game. It includes sabotage. Sabotage-by-gripe may be intentional, or it may not. But it is always dangerous—to everyone involved.

Gregarious Gary's management style was straight out of the sixties—lots of tree hugging, flower power, and love and harmony. He wanted everyone to get along like one big happy family. He also avoided making tough decisions because he was uncomfortable with the social consequences of being a manager and leader.



Devious Dave was Gregarious Gary's number two. Devious Dave was much brighter than the average aviation professional, including Gregarious Gary. Devious Dave was also tremendously uncomfortable with ambivalence. He felt strongly about most things and was very well versed on his reasons for each of his positions. As a result, he neither respected Gregarious Gary's philosophy nor did he believe that Gregarious Gary's "soft" style was good for an aviation department where, in Devious Dave's eyes, rules and limits are important to safety.

Despite all of Devious Dave's brilliance, he was unable to get Gregarious Gary to set a firm course for the department. Devious Dave saw Gregarious Gary's lack of leadership as a threat to the department. His first attack was head on. He tried to argue with Gregarious Gary about the issues and their consequences. But Gregarious Gary played a pacifist. He avoided or discounted each confrontation.

Devious Dave realized he could not win this battle with a frontal assault. So he resorted to gorilla tactics. He sabotaged Gregarious Gary. The sabotage was both passive and active.

The passive sabotage was insidious. Devious Dave withdrew his support of Gregarious Gary. When he could see that Gregarious Gary was in the midst of making a mistake or was about to step into a bad situation, Devious Dave just sat back and watched it happen. And when it did happen, Devious Dave was most helpful in pointing out what went wrong (making certain everyone noticed the disaster), whose fault it was, and how Devious Dave's approach would have prevented the failure.

Devious Dave's active sabotage was much more malicious. He was smart enough to aim his gripes at gullible targets. He started the gripe with a disclaimer that he was only concerned with the welfare of the department. Then he would drop the latest nugget that was designed to undermine confidence in Gregarious Gary and his leadership. The targets for Devious Dave's droppings included flight department members and key passengers. Unchecked, Devious Dave could have successfully destroyed Gregarious Gary's position.

It takes two to play this dangerous game of *Gripe*: a weak manager, and an overly zealous and ambitious opponent. Carl Janssen, ARCO's retired Manager of World Wide Corporate Real Estate and Aviation, used Gripe Judo masterfully to fend off the Devious Daves of the world. He had three moves:

First, everyone had the full right and responsibility to disagree with Carl's decisions. Carl assumed he didn't know everything and wanted others to be charged with the responsibility of adding their knowledge and experience to help the department succeed.

Next, try him twice. If the first effort with Carl didn't satisfy the challenger, Carl openly invited a return effort. Maybe Carl had not understood the issue or maybe the argument could be better made. On the other hand, maybe Carl's point of view wasn't well understood by the concerned party, either.



Finally, if, upon appeal, the dissenter still felt strongly about the issue, Carl would set up a no-fault meeting for the two of them to get together with the in-house expert on the issue (HR, legal, whomever). The results of that meeting were expected to be definitive.

When a Griper begins to get out of hand, it is important to point out that his or her actions are dangerous to the group and themselves. Well meaning people will normally be taken aback by the realization of the damage they are doing and the consequences of their actions.

A Few Good Moves

The *Gripe* game flourishes because many people aren't taught much about how to succeed in life. The bright ones learned early that they were usually the first to figure out what was wrong. But no one taught them that life is like a Texas Tango—it takes two steps. Step one is to identify the problem. The rest of the dance is to take that second step and follow through with action.

Happily enough, premeditated sabotage is rare. But a malicious griper must be controlled quickly and effectively. Otherwise, the game will get out of hand.

There are a few good moves you can use in winning the game of *Gripe*:

First, no one can point out a problem unless they are willing to be part of the solution. Simply stirring things up is not a recipe for success. No go – No Gripe.

Second, gripes are not allowed to devolve into gossip. If comments are made about someone, it must be in the subject's presence. (A lot of unproductive conversations get stopped by this one.)

Third, gripe only about what is within your grasp. If the department cannot control or influence it, let go of it.

Using these simple but effective Gripe Judo moves can easily help you win the *Gripe Game*. And when you win, your whole department wins.

(Note: It is easy to see yourself or people you know in each of the above examples. However, as they say in the books and movies, all similarities between the characters in this article and any person, living or dead, is strictly coincidental. So quit griping about it!)

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