

You Make Things Better for Animals ...

... but what about for yourself and your colleagues?

BY LAUREN GLICKMAN

We all know why we work for animals. Whether we're tending to a single injured puppy or working on a cockfighting bust that involves a thousand birds, we're seeking to make the world a more humane place. We believe that by doing this work, we can make things better, and we use our influence—our minds, bodies, resources, and time—to work as powerfully as possible. It doesn't matter whether we're making sure a single kennel is clean and safe or working on legislative issues that will impact an entire species; all of this work represents us using everything at our disposal to advance our lifesaving missions.

So now, let's think locally: How do we influence the more immediate environment around us?

It's easy to fixate on irritated thoughts about the guy who just surrendered his dog and how irresponsible he is. Or on the fact that a co-worker always leaves her shift early. It's so easy to perceive the ways others negatively impact you—in fact, it's hard *not* to see it! But it's harder to stop and consider your own behavior and its impact on the people nearby. For example, do you race around constantly, conveying the impression that you're so busy that nobody feels comfortable asking you for help? Do you constantly talk about the things that bother you, yet rarely tell others the things you're happy about? Are you open to requests when they're made of you, or do you immediately get defensive and perceive the request as an insult?

In other words, do you tend to make things better or worse for those around you?



This is worth considering carefully. We all impact the people around us, and in any given moment, we may be making things easier or harder. As we work tirelessly to make a more humane world for animals, we need to make our organizations better places for people.

The good news is that each one of us has the power to do this. We don't have to wait. You can start doing it right now, in whatever way works for you. For example, you could choose to give people the benefit of the doubt. You could let someone else go first when sharing ideas. You could practice compassion with those who rub you the wrong way. You could thank someone for doing something well. You could find at least one thing you appreciate about a co-worker who gets on your nerves, and

focus on that one thing. You get to decide where you put your attention. It's not easy, of course, especially when we've developed poor habits, but it's essential to remember what we can do, what is working well, and what we like.

Let's think about complaining for a moment, an act that definitely impacts the environment around us. At some point, we have all complained. Sometimes we feel better afterward, and sometimes we feel worse. Grab a pen and paper and jot down all the reasons you complain and the ways it helps you. Take your time and really think about the payoff. Why do so many of us complain? What do we get from complaining?

Did you write things like "getting attention"? "Getting to be right"? (Any time I'm complaining, I'm very clear that

I'm right about something!) Validation? Sympathy? Release? These are nearly universal reasons that people complain: There is a payoff. It feels good.

When we complain, we are trying to get a need met. We need to be heard, validated, and seen. But stop and consider the flip side—the cost of complaining. On another piece of paper, jot down all the reasons you *don't* like complaining. What do you dislike about how you feel when you do it? What about when others do?

Did you write that complaints often lack solutions? That complaining is often repetitive and one-sided? That it usually doesn't make things better? That it creates a negative environment?

Let's not lose sight of the fact that nearly everyone in the field of animal protection is here because we have a fundamental complaint. It's a complaint about the way animals are treated, and we've chosen to take personal action to address this. Having a complaint isn't the problem. It's how we handle that complaint that can cause problems. The trouble with some complaining is that we're often grumbling about things that we have no control over to someone who has no power to help. On top of that, when we complain, we're focusing on the things that bother us most.

When complaining becomes what I call a "going-nowhere conversation" (i.e., the complaining is about something that is in the past, will not change, and/or the complainer and listener have no power to affect the situation), it has a very negative emotional impact on everyone within earshot. It kills joy and multiplies dissatisfaction and anxiety.

What's more, if you're one of those chronic complainers, you might want to ask yourself if you're stuck in a victim mentality. Do people seem to be trying to spend less time listening to you? Don't beat yourself up if you recognize yourself in this. You can make a positive change.

I've created a complaint experiment designed to bring awareness to the nature of your conversations. The experiment is an invitation to refrain from complaining for three months. It's not an invitation to stop talking about what's bothering you; it's about sharing what bothers you in a very particular way. Go to animalsheltering.org/complaintpledge and check it out. Consider if you want to try it. I can promise you that if you take it on wholeheartedly, you'll see big positive changes in your life. (If you have questions about how it can work for you and you'd like to talk about it, write to me at lauren@forayconsulting.com, and I'd be happy to talk with you.)



Here is something I want to reiterate to ensure that you understand clearly. The lesson here is *not* that you should never tell anyone about the things that frustrate and bother you. The lesson is that if you're going to share a complaint, you can do it responsibly: Bring a constructive complaint to the person who can actually do something about it. Make a direct request of someone who can help, and listen when you receive a response.

Direct communication is often difficult and uncomfortable. It takes a lot of courage, but it's essential if we want to have authentic relationships at work, so that we can be as effective as possible in creating a more humane world for animals. Bottling things up isn't a healthy solution and will only contribute to symptoms of compassion fatigue by increasing your sense of isolation. The key is that when you talk about a problem or about someone you work with, make sure you talk to someone outside of your work group. Our co-workers are managing their own stress and anxiety; we can spare them ours. Another excellent way to help yourself is by asking the person you speak with to listen in a particular way: Let them know if you want them to simply understand what you're going through, or if you want help. That way you're more likely to get what you need.

In the next issue of *Animal Sheltering*, we will explore a lens through which we can look at things that upset us. We'll also examine the process we go through when we interpret the world around us, examining how much of what we see is truly there, and how much is created by our preconceived notions. ■