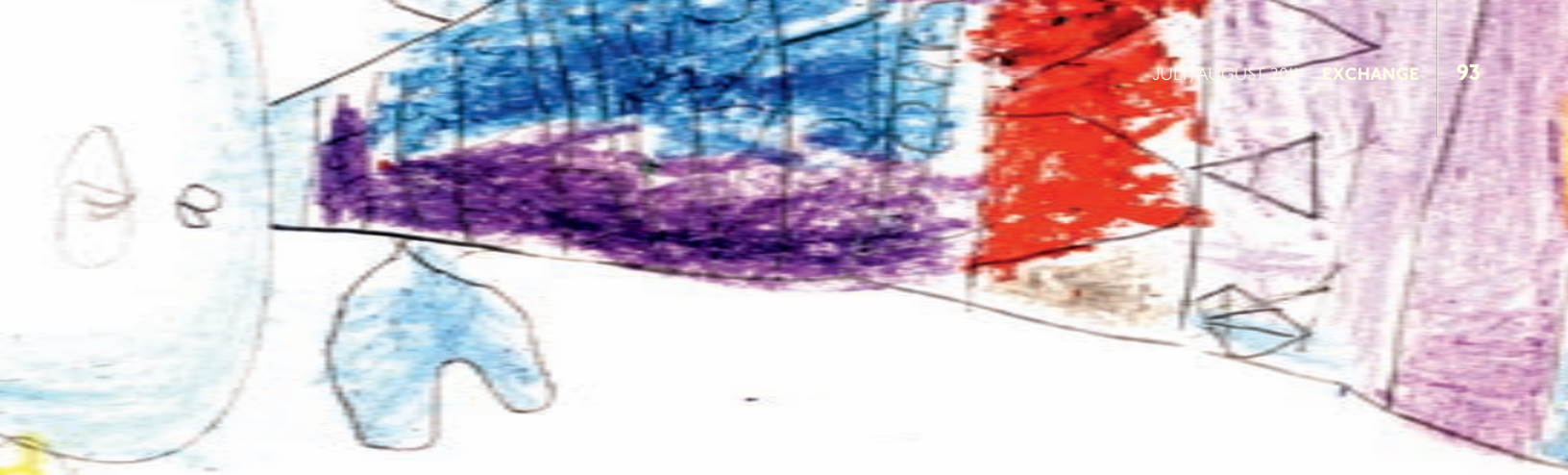

Eliminate whining in the workplace:

Moving beyond "Grin and bear it"

by Holly Elissa Bruno

If you don't like something, change it.
If you can't change it,
change your attitude.
Don't complain.
— Maya Angelou

My mother had favorite sayings like: "The only thing on earth you can be sure of is death and taxes." She also believed, "Whiners and complainers will always be with us." In my mother's day, human dynamics like whining seemed unchangeable. "Grin and bear it" was her motto.

With all due respect to my mom and her generation, I believe early childhood professionals not only can, but must change our behavior that negatively affects children. Children cannot be their curious, exuberant, or whimsical selves in an atmosphere laden with adult whining and negativity. Maya Angelou's advice to adults would be: "Change your attitude." Are you inclined to line up with my mother or Maya Angelou about whining at work?

Do you have a whiner at work? How does her continuous complaining affect you and the other adults? What does her whining model for children? Would you welcome a 'No Whining' zone where you could focus on the everyday miracle of educating (and learning from) young children?

If you think whining, like death and taxes, is an unchangeable element of the human condition, read on. You may discover that you have more power than you think to uplift your workplace one step at a time. Are you ready?

Let's assess:

What motivates people to whine?

Why do many of us feel obliged to listen, soothe, and assure the whiner she has been wronged?

Do whiners have the power to deflate organizational morale?

What steps can peers take to set 'No whining' boundaries around themselves?

What supervisory tools help whiners identify, resolve, and/or get help with the underlying problem?

Why people whine

When most of us hit a bump in the road, we share our troubles with a trusted friend or colleague. We ask for and accept help to be able to move on. A whiner, however, gets stuck in her troubles until, eventually, she is defined by them. Rather than seeking help, the whiner looks for endless sympathy; in fact, she refuses help.

Author Rick Kirshner explains, "Whiners feel helpless and overwhelmed by an unfair world. Their standard is perfectionism, and no one and nothing measures up to it. But misery loves company, so they bring their problems to you. Offering solutions makes you bad company, so their whining escalates" (2004, p. 11). Your sympathetic listening allows the whiner to feel temporarily lighter. You allow the whiner to lay her heavy burden on another person. You, however, will eventually feel weighed down as a result. The whiner continues to feel victimized even though you share her burden.

Whiners demand your complete attention. They control the conversation, by determining the topic, who talks, who listens, and what the outcome will be. Whiners assume your job is to comfort

Holly Elissa Bruno, MA, JD, author, teacher, keynote speaker and radio host describes herself as a 'recovering attorney.' She served as Assistant Attorney General for the state of Maine and Assistant Dean at the University of Maine School of Law. While working as Associate Professor and Dean of Faculty at the University of Maine-Augusta, Holly Elissa was selected as 'Outstanding Professor.' She is an alumna of Harvard University's Institute for Educational Management. She teaches leadership and management courses nationwide for Wheelock College. Her ground-breaking textbook, *Leading on purpose: Emotionally intelligent early childhood administration* was published by McGraw-Hill. Holly Elissa's keynotes have received rave reviews from audiences from Reykjavik to Phoenix, and Tulsa to Tampa. Her online radio program, Heart to heart conversations on leadership: Your guide to making a difference can be heard anytime at BAMradionetwork.com or by going to hollyelissabruno.com.

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and soothe them. They are certain they have been unjustly victimized. Whiners come in two varieties:

> *There's a plan for their lives, but they're not in it. Instead they wallow in their woe, whine incessantly, and carry the weight of the world on their shoulders.*
> (Brinkman & Kirschner, 2004, p. 11)

- Situational whiners struggle with a specific dilemma they can't solve alone. Partner with them to resolve the dilemma. With solutions spelled out and action taken, the burden lifts and whining stops. In other words, as you help the lion remove the thorn from his paw, he heals and returns to his daily path.

- Chronic whiners are trapped in a world of no solutions. They "suffer from a severe inability to see what could and should be, but compensate with the ability to see only what's wrong with what was and what is" (Kirschner, 2004, p. 169). The thorn in the lion's paw becomes a thorn in your side.

In the case of the situational whiner, your empathetic and mutual problem-solving approach can work. Chronic whiners require an extra step or more. In both cases, however, the whining can be redirected and/or the underlying pain can be transformed.

Why do we feel obliged to listen to and comfort whiners?

We are a nurturing profession, dedicated to helping people grow. We also can be conflict avoidant; many of us would rather put up with whining than confront the whiner about her continuous negativity. For many of us, confrontation is a dirty word. Psychologist Phyllis Chesler (2000) explains, "Many women still expect professionals to mother them (hold them to low standards, protect them), rather than to lead them" (p. 31).

How do you respond when you see a whiner coming your way? Do you try to avoid him, or end up commiserating with him again and again? Can you imagine telling him, "Since I can't help you with that problem, please don't bring it to me again"?

Situational whiners: When mutual problem solving works

Sitting beside the situational whiner and helping her identify the underlying cause of the problem along with feasible solutions can work. That's because, the 'situational whiner' is stuck in a situation she can't see beyond. Once she's been able to vent, regain perspective, and talk through solutions with another helpful adult, the situational whiner can resolve the issue and move on.

Helpful questions to ask the situational whiner are:

Can you tell me what is troubling you and give me a concrete example to help me understand?

Let's imagine this problem can be resolved. What do you need from me and what is one step you can take to make things better?

You need to maintain your boundaries about what you realistically can and cannot do to help. Most situational whiners, with help finding their path up and out, can summon up the courage needed to face their problem. Amelia Earhart knew: "Courage is the price that life exacts for peace." With focused assistance from a supervisor or colleague, a situational whiner can step out of the victim role. Her life energy returns and she can help others face their challenges.

> *If you are the manager of the Whiner, it is important to take control and draw the line firmly on complaining, since this behavior, perhaps more than any other . . . can undermine and destroy morale and team spirit.*
> (Brinkman & Kirschner, 2004, p. 173)

Both peers and supervisors can use this problem-solving approach with situational whiners. However, peers especially need to be sure the whiner is not taking valuable time away from your work with children and families. If the situational whiner becomes a chronic whiner, she'll require a different approach.

Chronic whiners: Taking the ship down with them

A chronic whiner knows no other way. She believes no one can help. Life is to be endured, not enjoyed. You can sit beside the chronic whiner and attempt to problem solve "'til the cows come home" without having a positive impact. She won't or can't budge from her gloomy world view. Supervisors are the appropriate person to deal with chronic whiners.

With wet blanket negativity, chronic whiners can rip the spirit out of their organization. Have you ever sat beside someone who keeps saying, "We've tried that before and it doesn't work" or "That will never happen"? The chronic whiner's 'can't do' attitude dampens everyone's enthusiasm.

Negativity spreads

Physiologically, chronic whiners affect our 'mirror neurons,' those neurons that imitate the moods of people around us. Before we can stop to think, our mirror neurons are blindsided by negativity. If you've sat in a car beside a driver

displaying road rage, you can identify with the feeling of being blasted out the window. If you've felt a frisson of pride singing your national anthem or your alma mater in a group, you have experienced the uplifting impact on your mirror neurons.

Mirror neurons activate before we can assess what's happening to us. Dr. Louis Cozolino (2006) explains, "Even though we cherish the idea of individuality, we live with the paradox that we constantly regulate each other's internal biological states" (p. 3). In the case of whining, before we know it, the chronic whiner has taken down everyone around her including colleagues, children, and families.

Calling out chronic whiners

Just as listening to chronic whiners resolves nothing, neither does running from the chronic whiner. She'll spread her discontent elsewhere. As the whiner's peer, you have two choices: Refer the whiner to her supervisor and/or have one very frank conversation with her. Consider these steps:

- Call the question: "Please give me a concrete example of the problem. Let's sit down right now to see if we can find some solutions."
- If the chronic whiner refuses to accept responsibility for problem solving, use this magic phrase: *"Since I can't help you with that problem, please don't bring it to me again."*
- By removing yourself as a dumping ground for the chronic complainer, you establish a boundary that cannot be invaded.

The first time I used this approach, I quickly observed the whiner's goal was to whine, not to problem solve. I felt depleted by my attempt to help her work through to a solution. We did not share a common goal. The next time she returned to complain, I told her, "Leigh Ann, since I can't help you with that problem, please don't bring it to me again." She came toward me three more times, ready to download her discontent. Each time, she had to turn around and go elsewhere. My boundaries freed me to focus on my work with an upbeat attitude.

How can supervisors help?

Supervisors may need to take another approach. The first thing to determine is whether the whiner has medical issues causing the negativity. Special steps need to be followed to ensure that the Americans with Disabilities Act is honored.

Are chronic whiners protected by the ADA (as amended)?

Some chronic whiners may suffer from depression. When we're depressed, everything around us feels gloomy and overwhelming. Whining is a natural symptom. Chronic depression is a disability under the ADA (Americans with Disabilities Act, revised 1/1/2009).

The ADA does not allow employers to ask an applicant or employee: "Do you have a disability?" Nonetheless, a director can ask, "Is there anything you would like to share with me about why you have been so discouraged and overwhelmed recently?"

If the whiner tells you she is clinically depressed, she opens the door for you to request information about what would help her do her job without complaining. Thank her for sharing this information and ask her to provide her doctor's description of the disability, along with recommendations for reasonable accommodations. Work together with the employee to tailor a way for her to do her job with this negotiated assistance.

A reasonable accommodation may be providing a place for her to store her medication and a schedule that ensures she can take the medication on time. The ADA does not require your program to endure 'undue hardship.' If the cost of

accommodating the employee will place your program in financial jeopardy, you are likely not required to make that accommodation.

If a chronic whiner does not voluntarily tell you she has a medical condition causing her severe negativity, she does not open the door to ADA protection. In that case, Kirschner (2004) recommends saying, "If you don't want to talk solutions, that's your decision. But I don't want to hear any more complaining and I don't want you distracting the people around you by whining about your problems to them. When you're ready to focus on the solutions, I'll be here" (p. 173). Supervisors may need to take chronic whiners through the steps of progressive discipline: Stop the unprofessional behavior or leave the organization.

What's the difference between venting and whining?

Most of us need to 'get things off our chest.' How many of us go home and vent everyday frustrations to our partner or text a trusted friend? Has that listener urged you to take action instead of just complaining about a situation? Maybe she's even said, "Get over it. Move on!" For venting to be helpful rather than tiresome, like whining, venting needs to be contained within boundaries. Otherwise, venting quickly slides into whining, or worse, gossip.

Who is the most appropriate person at work for you to vent to? If you answer "My colleague or team teacher," reconsider how continuous venting may deplete your colleague's energy. Remember the effect of mirror neurons? Moods are catching. Further, what do children learn when they hear adults complain?

Consider instead these restrictions on venting:

- Vent only to an appropriate person (like your supervisor).
- Limit the amount of time that you vent; more than three minutes of venting may turn into whining.
- If you find yourself venting about the same thing over and over again, get help identifying and resolving the underlying issue.

Beware of venting sliding into gossiping which is: "talking about another person who is not present with the intention of harming her reputation; listening to gossip is gossiping" (Bruno, 2008). Like whining, gossiping is certain to harm the spirit of your organization.

Winners not whiners

For early childhood professionals, both peers and supervisors, confronting adult whining or any other offensive behavior can be difficult. Eighty percent of early childhood leaders prefer to avoid conflict and hope the problem will just go away (Bruno, 2008). We see ourselves more as nurturing professionals than feisty warriors. I have learned that telling a whiner, "Since I can't help you with that problem, please don't bring it to me again" is an act of compassion. In 12-step programs, this kind of compassion is called 'tough love.'

When author Rick Kirschner was a guest on my radio program, Heart to heart conversations on leadership: Your guide to making a difference (BAMradionetwork.com, 2010) he explained, "We need to listen to go deep." I've learned that when I listen deeply to a person who is complaining, I can better assess whether the person wants help resolving her problem or needs me to side with her as a victim to life's injustices. Although I am happy to help another person, I am no longer a willing dumping ground for a person who does not take responsibility to resolve her problems.

The next time you sense a whiner is coming your way, consider your options:

- Do you want to listen?
- Do you want to help her face her problem?
- Do you want to refer her to someone who can help?
- Or do you want to take a stand and say, "Since I can't help you with that problem, please don't bring it to me again."

Whatever your choice, you no longer have to feel at the mercy of whiners. The choice is yours.

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