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SAVI® : Dealing with Complaints by Drs. Juli and Rolland Fellows

SAVI®, the System for Analyzing Verbal Interaction, was created and developed by Anita Simon, Ed.D. and Yvonne Agazarian, Ph.D. References to SAVI® are used with permission.

Last time we talked about complaints – how they appear to be risk-free ways of getting out uncomfortable feelings and how, at the same time, they pollute the organization’s emotional climate and undermine morale. They tend to leave behind unpleasant feelings in both listener and complainer without guiding anyone towards a useful goal. In this article we’ll discuss how to deal with complaints when you are the listener.

One of the things I love about the System for Analyzing Verbal Interaction® is that it doesn’t suggest that “one size fits all” for communication. Instead of suggesting only one way to handle a given situation, it offers many choices. You won’t sound like a robot or a soap opera therapist. SAVI® allows flexibility according to both your own style of talking and your own goals for a conversation.

The first step in dealing with any red light behavior involves choosing your communication goals. For example, when someone complains to you, do you want to politely end the conversation so you can get back to work? Do you want to express your own frustration about the situation? Do you want to help solve the problem? Do you want this person to know that you won’t listen to complaints? Knowing your goal will help you select a SAVI® behavior that increases the odds of reaching your goal.

SAVI® allows us to choose communication behaviors that are most likely to reach our goals. It allows us to test hypotheses or guesses about what’s most likely to work in our favor. However, since humans are all unique and we can never predict the future with certainty, all of our guesses remain guesses until we’ve tried things out in the real world. Like a good cook, you start with a recipe and then try different things (behaviors) and see how they work. As you try new ways of talking, you find the ones that work best for you.

Let’s take a situation in which your goal is to politely end the conversation so you can get back to work. The politeness part of your goal suggests that you want to express some responsiveness (reflect feelings or paraphrase) and you also want to set a limit (non-hostile self assertion). Let’s see how this might play out.

Complainer: *I can’t believe we’re still out of XYZ supplies! Those people in purchasing are bound and determined to make us crazy. They just don’t care that we can’t do our jobs without those supplies. They take their sweet time because it wouldn’t be “convenient” to hurry just for our sake. (complaint, sq. 1)*

You: *You’re really frustrated not to have what you need for the patients (reflect feelings, sq. 7)*

Complainer: *Yea, you could call it frustrating (sarcasm, sq. 1). They just don’t care about “our little problems”. (complaint, sq. 1)*

You: *Connie, I’m in the middle of writing up these lab results before I forget them and I can’t talk now. I’ll bring up the issue in tomorrow’s staff meeting.*

Complainer: *Yea, like that will do any good. (neg. prediction, sq. 2)*

You: *I’m still willing to try it. (personal information, sq. 4) . (turns back to work.)*

The table below shows you some options you might try in response to a complaint.

Goal	SAVI® Square	Example of this behavior
Reflect the feeling buried in the code	7 (Mirrors others inner experience)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>You look really irritated.</i> • <i>It sounds like you hate it and haven't been able to change things.</i> • <i>You sound frustrated.</i>
Ask the speaker to make a proposal or say what he or she wants	5 (Broad questions)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>How would you do it if you were in charge?</i> • <i>What do you need right now?</i> • <i>What would you like me to do right now? (be sure you use a neutral tone, not a sarcastic one.)</i>
Say how <u>you</u> feel in the moment.	7 (Tells own feeling)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>I'm also frustrated about late supply deliveries.</i> • <i>I'm angry that our supply deliveries have been late so often this month.</i>
Say what <u>you</u> want in the moment.	4 (Personal information, present)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>I want to talk to Bill about this.</i> • <i>I want to finish what I'm doing before I talk more with you</i> • <i>I can't talk now. I'm available for lunch today.</i>

It's not about being sure you "get the right square" but getting more of a feel for the difference between red, yellow and green light behaviors. If the above table seems too complicated, here are some more general guidelines.

1. Simply avoiding red light behaviors yourself will be an excellent first step! Oftentimes, that's all that's needed.
2. With complaints, avoid responding with opinions or proposals. They will rarely be heard and may provoke even more complaining.
3. Practice being assertive and setting limits without being hostile (square 7, self assertion). This is what was taught in the original assertiveness training 20+ years ago. Practice being assertive without hostility in low-risk situations first, with people you trust, so you get comfortable with this skill.