

A CULTURE OF COMPLAINT

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I recently handled three sexual harassment complaints: two for women complainants, one a male 'perpetrator'. They all resolved, more or less unhappily for the individuals, but the Very Big Companies where they worked paid their lawyers and got on with business.

I also received a bitter letter from an old man who 'blew the whistle' on a statutory body, got compensated - eventually - for its treatment of him, but still feels damaged and betrayed, even by me, and I got his money for him (free!)

This made me thoughtful about what Robert Hughes called the 'culture of complaint'. We don't deal very cleverly with dissent.

We talk a lot, these days, about building 'community'. Communities are formed by bonds between people. The strongest bonds form between people who resemble each other. We gravitate to those in whom we recognise what we like and approve in ourselves. Communities also bond by excluding 'others,' those who don't fit in. That is why traditional workplaces resent new participants, such as women and people from minority cultures. Cultures must adapt to and accommodate difference if they are to continue to grow, which is why we have anti-discrimination laws and rules about fair treatment at work.

Communities of interest grow from shared values and experiences. That's why they turn on those who don't pick up cues and conform to those values, who look different, or don't behave predictably or as they 'should'. A whistleblower has to be destroyed, if the organisation can't accommodate a different view. A single, pregnant girl has to be cast out, if a community expects women to attach themselves to men, as we used to, while winking at her impregnator (morally, equally responsible): the Lad was just sowing wild oats, the Bad Girl reaps them.

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Traditionally, the military put groups of trainees through rigorous, usually unpleasant, initiation and training. After shared miseries they accept, and require their peers to comply with, the desired conduct code. Compliance becomes a virtue, per se. This may explain why, on 19 January this year, after the media reported a young woman Army Major's opinion about the Army's 'discriminatory' treatment of women, her Commanding Officer had her marched off the job, required her to submit to medical examination, then relieved her of duties when she refused (breaking ranks, apparently, means you must be mad.)

That's why masculine-oriented organisations respond to women's complaints of discrimination or harassment as they do. Last year, for example, a tribunal awarded record damages against Victoria Police after finding that senior officers took unprecedented disciplinary action against Senior Constable McKenna when she made discrimination and harassment allegations (they have appealed.)

Complaining is like a submerged branch breaking, unexpectedly, the surface of a smoothly flowing stream. Casting great ripples, it is pounded by the current, urged from its anchorage to be hurried downstream, cast onto a bank or pulled under again. Most harassment complainants leave their jobs: they have to, or drown.

But we also reject those in whom we recognise what we dislike in ourselves. That is how male leaders deal with 'harassing' colleagues. They may have united in defending and denying the complaint; yet when it's over, most accused harassers are quietly pushed out later, anyway. Why? Because he caused trouble. Because a sleaze, bully or blackmailer is not, in the words of the Pharisee, as fine a person as ourselves. Because if we pluck out an offending eye, we deal with the 'disease' once and for all. Casting out the 'harasser' means the organisation never acknowledges that his conduct was symptomatic of organic disorder. In my experience - I have handled about

3,000 complaints - most harassers are a product of a culture that accommodated or encouraged sexual bullying.

It takes a long time to create a culture. It takes courage and intelligence to change one. We seem to be short on both.