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Complaining during closed training: its functions and consequences

Abstract: During occupational trainings given to Polish employees, one can quite often observe complaining. The instructor can use it for problem-solving or for purification. Thus, complaining plays an instrumental or cathartic function. This has consequences for the entire training process. The aim of the article is to present the phenomenon of complaining during training courses and to discuss its correlation with different variables such as learning results, participants' mood and the evaluation of the training course. Questions were therefore posed about which function of complaining would be more conducive to the process of learning the material and result in an improvement of the participants' mood, as well as how the instructor would be evaluated, at the response level, depending on which function of complaining is activated during the training. In order to answer these questions, the authors designed an experiment in which complaining was induced in members of an organization, performing either an instrumental function or a cathartic function. The results show that the most effective strategy is the use of its object as a point of departure for problem solution.

Keywords: complaining, training

Introduction

Participation in training courses is aimed, above all, at improving professional skills, which makes it possible to satisfy the needs of the organization. However, due to the group-based process involved, participation in various forms of professional development is accompanied by additional phenomena, which may modify the effectiveness of training programs and the satisfaction of those who take part in them. In the secure circumstances ensured by participation in training outside the workplace, trainees open up and often allow themselves to behave differently than they usually behave in the work environment, which may lead to complaining. Course attendants' complaining depends on the discussed issues. For example, it might relate either to work conditions or relations with customers and superiors.

The authors' experience suggests that a phenomenon frequently occurring in closed training is the participants' complaining, especially in Polish culture. It might have impact on the entire training process and its results, such as learning effects and attendants' reactions. Complaining plays some important roles; the main ones have an instrumental or cathartic function, which is why trainers should be aware of the phenomenon and should know how to use and handle these functions to make their trainings

more effective. If trainers stop talking about difficult subjects, trainees will not be able to concentrate on a training. However, if trainers let others discuss problems further, they will not realize the intended course agenda. What strategy should be chosen?

The aim of the article is to ascertain which function of complaining is more conducive than others to the process of acquisition of the training material, as well as improves mood, and influences instructor evaluation at the reaction level. The topic of complaining is not new, however, it is not described in literature in relation to training aspects.

The Specificity of Adult Training

In literature, training is defined as “a systematic action designed to establish habits, abilities, skill for work in places where the practical problems of occupational psychology are found” (Buzzard, 1970, p. 89). A more contemporary definition presents it as a planned process associated with improving skills, gaining knowledge, or developing specific attitudes (Łaguna, 2004). According to the ordering entity and the target group, it is possible to distinguish two types of training: open and closed. Closed training courses, as opposed to open ones, are dedicated to employees with an appropriate status (Calder & McCol-lum, 2013). They are usually designed for the needs of

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a particular organization and meant for its employees (Woźniak, 2012). It is the management of the firm that determines those needs and identifies the element that requires development or improvement in order for the enterprise to increase its efficiency in a particular area. The employees' participation in a given course is obligatory; training is held during working hours and the expenses are covered by the employer.

The participants in a training course can be defined as a group because they meet the relevant criteria – goal, interactions, and a sense of community (Torój, 2016). In the case of closed training programs, the main aim of training is usually established by the organization. Still, apart from the main aim, participants may have additional goals, sometimes unconscious ones, modifying their behavior, which in turn influences the instructor-participants relationship, the participants-participants relationship, and educational outcomes. The alternative goals may entirely absorb cognitive resources, and the participants may be entirely focused on a current problem. The alternative goals may also be fully conscious – as when trainees equate training with a leisure trip. In this case, participants' motivation to work may be considerably lower and may affect the quality of their interactions with the instructor. Cooperation based on trust and acting for the common good is the next characteristic of a group. The third element defining a group is the sense of bond, which translates into participants ability to feel part of a larger whole, which in turn translates into higher efficiency in the functioning of the group. The sense of bond is integrated with group identity (Torój, 2016).

A product of many years of teaching tradition is group-based teaching, with the group not only ensuring that learners motivate one another to study but also making it possible to develop social skills, including emotional intelligence (Łaguna, 2004). In his conception concerning adult teaching, Knowles (2009) perceives adult students as independent and self-directed individuals, capable of deciding what will be useful for them, and the teacher's only task is to support the process of educational needs manifesting themselves as well as help the students satisfy them. Moreover, an adult has certain knowledge, which he or she can use during discussion or when solving problems together. He or she tends to have an intrinsic motivation for development, and learning is meant to contribute to actual improvement of functioning in everyday life and to personal growth (Kozaka & Łaguna, 2009).

Occupational learning and development influence either individual or organizational performance and are crucial for organizations to gain a competitive advantage (Tharenou et al., 2007). Training courses are treated as an investment that is meant to bring notable benefits within a specified period of time because of their impact on employee's commitment, productivity, profitability, competitiveness, customer satisfaction and more (see, for example Nguyen et al., 2010). To assess if the expectations have been met, it is necessary to carry out an evaluation. In the training market, the most often found evaluation method is the survey of participants' opinions concerning

the outcomes of training. During the evaluation, which is extended over time and performed by means of various instruments, it is possible to assess four elements: participants' reactions to training, their acquisition of new skills, transfer of knowledge and skills, and training efficacy as seen from the viewpoint of the organization's results (Kirkpatrick, 2001). The first and second elements (evaluation levels) refer to the influence of the training course on the participant, while the third and fourth levels concern its influence on the organization. Feedback from participants is a guideline for the instructor and the training department on whether the employees' expectations have been met and on what actions can be taken to improve the training process. This element of the training evaluation process can be compared to client satisfaction evaluation (Woźniak, 2012).

Complaining and Its Functions

Complaining consists in verbally expressing dissatisfaction, regardless of its contents and of whether or not it is actually experienced (Wojciszke & Baryła, 2001). Alicke (1992) states that complaining takes place when a person reveals an emotional attitude towards contents and when this does not actually mean identifying the weak points of the object.

Based on research (Alicke et al., 1992), it is legitimate to conclude that complaining is a universal phenomenon. Initially it was regarded as undesirable and destructive, until Kowalski (1996) noticed its positive aspect. Complaining can play the role of diagnosis, which is a point of departure for taking action aimed at removing the obstacle. The author postulates that complaining performs instrumental, cathartic, and self-presentation functions. Baryła and Wojciszke (2000) additionally identify the relational and magical functions.

The instrumental function. The characteristic feature of instrumental complaining is its aim, which is to change the situation. As reported by Alicke et al. (1992), this type is rarely found. Only twenty five percent of subjects complain because they want to introduce real change or deal with a problem. Viewed from a different perspective, instrumental complaining may manifest itself when a person wants to avoid undesirable states. The person hopes that communicating dissatisfaction will get him or her exempted from performing a particular action. Complaining may therefore take two forms: approach and avoidant (Żemojtel-Piotrowska, 2009).

The cathartic function. Complaining is usually intended to decrease negative emotions; as many as half of the acts of complaining are aimed at bringing relief to the person who complains (Alicke et al., 1992). Unlike in the case of the instrumental function, the motive of making changes in the environment does not occur in this case. Kowalski (1996) points out that talking about negative emotional states leads to purification – it means that complaining helps to defuse emotions and tension. In her experiment there were two groups of participants. They both had to think about a person they did not like, and then

the first group had to write a letter to that person with grievances against them or a letter with grievances against the experimenter. The second group had to write letters describing the previous day. It was observed that the first group felt better than the second one. It should be mentioned that the “purification” effect occurred in individuals who were not characterized by a permanent tendency to complain, referred to in the literature as chronic complaining. The point of departure in explaining the cathartic function can be the study by Wegner (1987), in which the author found that an attempt to control or stop thinking about a particular topic frequently has the opposite effect: thinking about a given object often appears with double strength. When the expression of negative emotions does not take place, what may occur is rumination, which leads to mood deterioration and problems in focusing on the task. Doliński (2005) notes that avoidant coping with negative emotions or stress is not an effective method but in fact a harmful one. In the literature it is possible to find a description of the influence of suppressed emotions on mental and physical condition. Suppressing emotions may predispose a person to coronary artery disease (Żemojtel-Piotrowska, 2009). Complaining can serve as a way for a person to find their bearings and to find meaning in what is happening around them; it can also be a point of departure for the development of cognitive strategies that will facilitate coping with adversities in the future. On the other hand, certain limitations caused by talking about disagreeable things should be pointed out. When the complaining person is judged negatively by the environment, his or her mood may deteriorate, which will lead to negative thoughts and, consequently, to further complaining and an even worse judgment from others. The social costs may appear, above all, in a cross-cultural environment, especially when the complaining person talks to people representing the norm of affirmation or “keep smiling.” When discussing complaining in the context of the cathartic function, it is worth noting the cathartic role of aggression. It shows that the “purifying” function is not confirmed. When an aggressive behavior takes place, tension decreases, but willingness to engage in aggressive behavior again does not perceptibly cease. Applying the above theory to the subject matter discussed here, it is possible to observe that when complaining is a response to actual dissatisfaction, tension is actually discharged but complaining may not be stopped and, as a result, it may be repeated – especially if complaining is strongly related to verbal aggression. People complaining about a given object often use strong expressions referring to vices, which can be interpreted as an attack: verbal aggression. As shown in the study conducted by Wojciszke and Baryła (2005a), complaining mainly lowers mood; this effect is the strongest when the cognitive faculty is burdened (Żemojtel-Piotrowska, 2009).

The self-presentation function. A person performs many social roles simultaneously, which means that in everyday life he or she has to put on “masks” in order to present himself or herself accordingly; this frequently

leads to goal achievement. Kowalski (1996) points out that complaining is also a method of self-presentation, because by complaining a person confirms having particular attributes. When pointing out the shortcomings of a given external object by complaining, an individual is at the same time stressing that he or she personally meets all the standards. American research confirmed that people who evaluated their environment negatively were evaluated more positively than those who pointed out its positive qualities (Żemojtel-Piotrowska, 2009). An individual who wants to win approval from his or her environment may adopt an attitude of conformism and join the complaining, for example by stressing the common stance. In order to maintain as high a level of self-esteem as possible after a failure, people usually complain about adverse external conditions. Paradoxically, complaining also occurs in the context of pleasant things and ones to be proud of. Particularly in a culture of complaining, talking about positive things directly may be perceived as self-righteousness and is socially undesirable. A solution is to present the advantages while at the same time complaining, for instance, about the difficulties or obstacles encountered on the way to the goal.

The relational function. Wojciszke and Baryła (2002) discussed the aspects of talking negatively about one’s environment in the context of the relational function. First of all, complaining may be a signal indicating the need for understanding or for a confirmation of a certain view. When the addressee shares the opinion on a given issue, it results in a proposal for the interlocutor to join the community, which may lead to the building of a deeper relationship. Revealing intimate data about oneself may be a sign of building a deep relationship, establishing a bond, and showing trust; it may stem from the belief concerning the culture of complaining and may be a response to the natural need for affiliation (Żemojtel-Piotrowska, 2009). The research conducted by the above authors showed that individuals who function in a culture of complaining believe in the negative consequences of expressing satisfaction and contentment. These consequences mainly consist in being rejected by the community. This phenomenon may lead to exclusion and thereby to mood deterioration. In the context of complaining performing the relational function, it is also worth noting that a negative attitude to general topics may be a sign of habitually entering into or maintaining conversation in this way. If the social situation is unclear, complaining may automatically appear as a point of departure for establishing contact with other people. On the other hand, social relations may be lower when complaining is excessive. This leads to negative mood in the people talking to each other and induces a negative attitude to the interlocutor (Żemojtel-Piotrowska, 2009).

The magical function. In unclear situations, where failure might occur, a person complains due to the implicit belief that talking about success will bring bad luck. According to the definition of magical thinking, the complaining individual believes that thoughts alone will

bring about real changes in the situation. This phenomenon is particularly visible when the outcome is important to the individual. The magical function is a response to the need for control over a particular situation when other actions are blocked (Wojciszke & Baryła, 2001).

Psychological Consequences of Complaining

The universality of complaining encouraged researchers to investigate its psychological consequences, both positive and negative. Few acts of complaining are aimed at improving the current situation of the complaining person through proactive thinking – i.e., thinking about what he or she can change in the current situation – or at improving another person’s behavior (complaining may take the form of corrective information). In some situations, complaining may be used for the purpose of mood improvement. During complaining, tension is relieved; if it was accumulated for a long time, it could lead to serious consequences (Kowalski, 1996). Research conducted by Wojciszke and Baryła (2002) showed that if complaining meets with the interlocutor’s approval, the complaining person’s mood improves because he or she feels social support. This diverts thoughts from the issue evoking dissatisfaction and leads to a focus on the supporting person. The use of complaining may facilitate establishing contact with other people, since interlocutors are able to find a common topic to talk about. An interesting aspect, mentioned by Kowalski (1996), is gaining financial benefits. Individuals who complain to an organization receive compensation in the form of vouchers, discounts, or gifts. Kowalski (1996) states, however, that complaining which does not stem from dissatisfaction may lead to dissatisfaction appearing in attitude towards a given object. This is caused by the need to minimize cognitive dissonance. A key aspect of the issues discussed is the possible mood deterioration as a result of complaining (Wojciszke & Baryła, 2005a). Researchers call this the vicious circle of complaining, which starts with the expression of dissatisfaction, followed by the activation of negative mood, which in turn enhances willingness to express dissatisfaction again. Three aspects underlie this phenomenon. The first one is the spontaneous maintenance of disapproval as a result of a facial or pantomimic expression. The second one is the “negativization of experiences as a result of affective priming” (Wojciszke & Baryła, 2002, p. 230). The third one is linked to the increase in dissatisfaction caused by focusing on it. Consequences are also observable in those who listen to complaining. As studies show, negative mood may be adopted from the message sender. This process takes place automatically, non-intentionally, and unconsciously; a focus on the content of complaining is not necessary. Kowalski (2002) describes the domino effect taking place in the context of complaining. Sometimes it is enough for one person to start complaining; as a result, the individuals interacting with that person also want to share their dissatisfaction or simply signal their presence.

The Functions of Complaining in Closed Training: The Present Study

In the situation of training there are characteristic relations between the trainees and the instructor as well as among the trainees. If these relations are built on the right values and if security is ensured, trainees’ openness to share their thoughts and experiences is high. In accordance with the domino effect, one situation described by a participant results in others expressing verbal dissatisfaction, regardless of the contents; sometimes the dissatisfaction expressed is not actually experienced. Another stimulus triggering the effect may be the instructor’s “touching on” a topic that is sensitive and that may set off complaining. This carries the risk of trainees’ mood deterioration, which may lead to their lower engagement and thereby decrease the chance of training objectives being achieved. A trainee in a worse mood may evaluate the training course lower and after its completion he or she may put internal training courses in a bad light to future trainees. On the other hand, some studies show that complaining may bring relief to the complaining person and decrease the accumulated negative emotions; it also offers an opportunity to establish deeper relations with the remaining trainees and receive social support. Therefore, we formulated questions concerning the outcomes of complaining depending on its function.

Question 1: Which function of complaining will be more conducive to the process of learning the training material?

The literature on the subject reports that the instrumental function is oriented to diagnosing the problem and finding the right solution – in the training situation, by trainees themselves (Kowalski, 1996). In this way, emphasis is placed on the person’s ability to make independent decisions regarding the optimal course of action. As shown by Knowles (2009), what plays an important role during effective learning in the case of adults is self-concept, which is largely based on the possibility of making independent decisions. An adult should be perceived as an independent and self-directed person. Knowledge is also a considerable resource for the remaining trainees, who can benefit from another person’s experience or be inspired when generating new problem solution plans. In order to learn more effectively and, consequently, to be more engaged, they should feel that their experience makes a difference in the learning process. In the case of the present experiment we chose the method called METAPLAN – activating the instrumental function, which transfers the burden of finding a solution to the current situation entirely to the trainee, thus stressing his or her significance in the entire learning process. Knowles (2009) states that an adult learns when he or she decides that learning should contribute to the improvement of everyday functioning. Activating the instrumental function of complaining highlights the fact that, unlike in the case of the cathartic function, training is oriented at solving a problem rather than merely talking about it. Additionally, in the case of closed training courses the solutions generated are based on a specific organizational culture,

which makes them easier to apply in everyday work. It can be concluded that, on the one hand, activating the instrumental function shows trainees an approach to a difficult situation – it teaches them to apply the proactive approach. However, it is benefits for the entire training process that should be sought above all. Applying the knowledge to the domain of training courses, one can conclude that the instrumental function can contribute to participants' higher engagement in training and thereby to an increase in the effectiveness of learning. It can therefore be assumed that instrumental complaining can be highly beneficial to training. At the same time, the cathartic function of complaining should be taken into account. As reported in the literature, as many as half of the subjects say that complaining is aimed at bringing relief to the complaining person (Alicke et al., 1992), which is why people easily find themselves in a situation of complaining and continue the topic. Researchers suggest that complaining itself can purify and decrease tension, but this does not lead to the cessation of complaining. The cathartic function can be implemented by means of trainees' free discussion, making it possible for them to analyze the topic. The discussion will lead to a decrease in tension, but this will not stop the behavior and trainees may revert to complaining again during the course. In accordance with the principles of social influence, other participants may adopt the same kind of behavior. In this case, trainees' cognitive resources will be focused on the object of complaining rather than on the contents of training. In view of the above, we formulated the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 1: Activating the instrumental function of complaining will be conducive to the process of learning the training material to a greater extent than activating the cathartic function and to a greater extent than no activation of complaining (the control group).

Question 2: Which function of complaining results in a better mood among the participants?

In order to answer this question, it is necessary to start with the study by Wojciszke and Baryła (2005a). These researchers found that observing a complaining person leads to mood deterioration. What becomes the center of attention is the complaining person's mood rather than the contents of complaining. During a training course, when observing other people's negatively tinged complaining, trainees uncontrollably adopt these people's mood and, as a result of this imitation, they also engage in the act of complaining. The topic of complaining will not make much difference. In the studies conducted by the above authors it can be observed that complaining lowers mood also in those who engage in complaining. They have demonstrated the vicious circle of complaining, which invalidates the thesis that postulates the cathartic function of complaining. A possible explanation of this phenomenon is provided in a series of studies by Strack (cited in Wojciszke & Baryła, 2002), showing that the expression of negative emotions that accompany complaining generates a tendency to fall into negative states. This effect is found also in the case of positive emotions, which increase the

tendency to experience positive states. According to Zajonc and Murphy (1994), negative emotions that accompany complaining may be transferred onto other objects. In the case of training, emotions that accompany complaining may be transferred in the form of a negative attitude to the issue raised by the instructor. Studies also show that self-focus increases the intensity of the states experienced. If a trainee focuses on the emotion he or she is experiencing, the emotion will become even stronger. Activating the instrumental function of complaining can contribute to a shift of focus to problem solution and thus to the desirable state. By activating the instrumental function of complaining, the individual tries to remove the cause of negative mood in secure circumstances ensured by the training course. If the difficulties are removed, negative mood may be replaced by positive mood, which will be carried over to the subject matter of the training course. The analyses of the literature resulted in the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 2: After the activation of the instrumental function of complaining, mood will be higher than in the case of activating the cathartic function.

Question 3: At the reaction level, will the instructor be evaluated higher in the case of applying a task activating the instrumental function of complaining?

The instructor plays an important role during a training course; he or she focuses both on the learning process and on the advancing group process. The instructor is responsible for the accomplishment of training objectives by means of appropriate methods, taking into account the needs of the group and understanding its dynamics. The instructor's task is to facilitate learning – and, as assumed in Question 1, activating the instrumental function of complaining is conducive to the learning process. The authors' professional experience shows that the instructor is the center of trainees' attention. They expect that they will be guided through the successive stages of the program and that in difficult situations the instructor will adopt an attitude of an active participant rather than a passive observer. Willingness to take up a difficult topic will also be appreciated. These components make up instructor performance evaluation. To sum up:

Hypothesis 3: At the reaction level, the instructor will be evaluated higher after applying a task activating the instrumental function of complaining than after free discussion sustaining the cathartic function of complaining and higher than in the control conditions.

Participants. The participants in the experiment were employees of one organization, each of them holding a position of Customer Advisor. For the purpose of developing the abilities necessary to perform their daily duties, they were sent for a closed training course conducted by an instructor employed within the organization. The course concerned issues related to customer service and sales techniques. The sample consisted of 76 individuals: 31 women and 45 men. The participants' age ranged from 22 to 61 ($M = 38.32$). The largest number of participants had secondary education ($n = 36$), the second

largest group were those with higher education ($n = 15$), followed by the groups with basic vocational ($n = 10$), post-secondary ($n = 10$), and elementary education ($n = 5$). The employees' total length of service ranged from 1 to 40 years ($M = 15.58$), and their length of service in the current position ranged from 0.5 to 14 years ($M = 4.56$). The majority of the participants lived in towns with a population under 250,000. The participants were randomly divided into three experimental groups of 25, 27, and 24.

Measures. In the experiment we used paper-and-pencil instruments as well as training methods adapted for the purposes of the study.

The General Mood Scale. This is a measure developed by Baryła and Wojciszke (2005b), consisting of 10 statements conveying general positive or negative mood (eg. "I am in a bad mood", "I feel great"). Next to each statement there is a 5-point scale, from 1 – *disagree* to 5 – *agree*. The respondent's task is to indicate his or her subjective rating next to each item. The General Mood Scale can be administered at various time intervals, which does not modify the results (the reported mood level or the internal consistency of the scale). In the present study, the participants were supposed to rate their current mood. Each item in the test has high discriminatory power, which implies high internal consistency of the scale. According to the authors of the method the reliability coefficients range from .75 to .96. As the authors report, mood scores correlate with the Mood Deterioration and Improvement Scale as well as with the Complaining Scale and the Self-Rumination Scale (also developed by Baryła and Wojciszke). They correlate strongly with the belief that the world is unjust and with general satisfaction with life.

Knowledge Test. This instrument was developed by the authors, based on the issues discussed during the training course. Each of the eight items relates to a different theoretical issue. Four answer options were available for each question, of which the trainee was supposed to choose only one. When indicating the answers, the respondent was not allowed to use any educational materials or consult other participants. Correct answers were summed. Two versions of the test were constructed: A and B; the difference between them is the different order of questions and answers. The participants completed Version A at the beginning of the training course and Version B at the end.

A sample question:

The customer buys a product when:

- a) The price of the product does not exceed the assumed budget
- b) Knows the benefits of the product
- c) Product parameters are at the highest level
- d) Answers a) and c) are correct.

Evaluation Survey. Designed by the authors, this instrument is meant to assess instructor performance at the reaction level. It consists of seven items, which relate to the instructor's specific abilities. Next to each item, the respondents individually indicate their rating on a 6-point scale (0-5), where 0 means the assessment of a given skill

as *very poor* and 5 as *very good*. Participants were asked about trainers' ability to contact the group, activate the group, prepare for the training, gain knowledge of the specifics of the participants' work, communicate content in a comprehensible way, support participants and show flexibility in adapting the training to the needs of the group. Additionally, the respondents were asked a question concerning the Net Promoter Score (NPS), which is an indicator measuring the level of trainees' satisfaction by asking if he or she recommends the training to colleagues in similar positions. NPS is an indicator of customer's satisfaction and loyalty, although it is not a competitive metric (Fisher, Kordupleski, 2019). In this case, trainees give their answer on an 11-point scale, from 0 – *I will certainly not recommend* to 10 – *I will certainly recommend* the training course. The assumption in this method is that the respondents who indicate the highest ratings (9-10) are enthusiastic about and attached to the product (i.e., training course), which means they will probably speak positively about it. While rating 7 or 8 means that the respondent presents neither positive nor negative attitude towards a training. The respondents indicating answers between 0 and 6 show dissatisfaction, and there is a risk that they will criticize the course outside the training room; in the case of training programs held within organizations, this affects the attitude of subsequent training groups. Before completing the survey, each respondent is informed about its purpose and about the importance of giving honest answers.

Respondent's particulars. This part consists of seven questions about sociodemographic information, namely: sex, age, total length of service, length of service in the current position, education level, and population in the place of residence. Additionally, the participants were asked to indicate their attitude towards training courses on an 11-point scale (0 – 10; 0 meant *strongly negative* and 10 meant *strongly positive*). This general question was asked strike just to determine to what extent the training coincided with the participants' expectations and whether employees could see sense in attending it.

METAPLAN. This is an activating method presented in the literature on training methods (cf. Kitowska & Kwacz, 2011), which makes it possible to graphically analyze a problem situation. It allows trainees to focus not only on the difficulty but also on looking for solutions and on inspiring actions aimed at removing the difficulty. Thanks to the method, proactive and analytic thinking is activated. This technique also enables trainees to simultaneously focus on one problem only, which prevents expanding the scope of discussion to other areas. The participants are divided into teams of three or four. Each group is given a flipchart on which a diagram is presented (Figure 1). The participants' task is to fill in each of its fields. When they have done the task, the participants present the conclusions. In the case of our study, METAPLAN activated the instrumental function of complaining.

Procedure. The experiment was conducted during six closed training courses. 76 participants were divided into

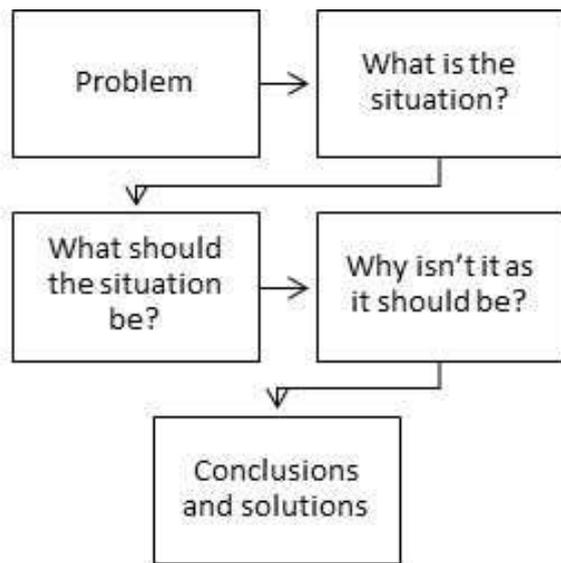


Figure 1. METAPLAN training technique. Source: authors' research

three experimental groups, whose size ranged from 10 to 14 trainees. They consented to take part in the study, but the actual aim of the experiment was masked. The participants were informed that the study was meant to contribute to the improvement of training effectiveness and were told that participation was voluntary and anonymous. In order to ensure anonymity, we randomly assigned 6-digit codes to the participants, which they put on the sheets in each stage of the procedure. To test the hypotheses, we designed a study whose detailed procedure is presented in Table 1.

Results

Means and standard deviations for all tested variables are shown in Table 2.

We performed an analysis of basic descriptive statistics together with Kolmogorov–Smirnov tests, Pearson’s *r* and Spearman’s *rho* correlation analyses, the Kruskal–Wallis test, and one-factor analysis of variance

Table 1. The Experimental Procedure

| Group I cathartic function | Group II instrumental function | Group III control group |
|---|---|-------------------------|
| At the beginning of training, the participants were given the Knowledge Test (Version A) and Respondent’s particulars to complete. | | |
| After 30 minutes of the training, the participants were given the General Mood Scale with the following instruction: “On the sheet of paper there is a scale measuring mood. Please indicate to what extent you agree or disagree with the sentences describing mood by marking the appropriate number next to each of them. Try not to miss any of the sentences.” | | |
| Inducing complaining in the participants. The subject of complaining was verified before the experiment on the basis of conversations with 30 people. The instructor said: “Recently, when driving a car, I heard on the radio that nowadays customers have increasingly high expectations regarding customer service. Have you also noticed this phenomenon?” Next, the instructor encouraged the trainees to share their observations. Complaining was reported when four negative reactions occurred. | The presentation of a video about the 20th anniversary of the company. The duration of the video was 18 minutes. | |
| Group I cathartic function | Group II instrumental function | Group III control group |
| Free discussion (cathartic function of complaining) between the participants, until the exhaustion of the topic. The instructor did not interfere in the discussion or interrupt the trainees. No time limit was set. | The use of METAPLAN (instrumental function of complaining). The instructor said: “Because you have also noticed the phenomenon of higher customer expectations, we will try by means of a task to see what our role is in this and what we can do. Let us divide into four teams. Using a flipchart, each group will be supposed to discuss and describe five steps: to define the problem, to describe what the situation is at present, what it should be, why it is not as it should be, and what the conclusions and solutions are. You have 15 minutes for preparation. Then I will ask you to present the poster.” The instructor uses a flipchart to draw the task diagram. The participants do the task and present the results of their work. | |
| The participants were given the General Mood Scale again and instructed as follows: “Once again I would like to ask you to complete the scale measuring mood. Please indicate to what extent you agree or disagree with the statements describing mood by marking the appropriate number next to each of them. Try not to miss any of the sentences.” | | |
| Continuation of the training scenario | | |
| Finally, the participants were asked to complete the Knowledge Test (Version B) and the Evaluation Survey . | | |

Source: authors' research

Table 2. Means and standard deviations for tested variables

| | <i>M</i> | <i>SD</i> |
|---|----------|-----------|
| Age | 38.32 | 11.31 |
| Length of service in general | 15.58 | 11.60 |
| Length of service in the current position | 4.56 | 3.35 |
| Knowledge test – differences | 6.54 | 1.04 |
| Knowledge test before a training course | 0.89 | 0.95 |
| Knowledge test after a training course | 7.43 | 0.66 |
| Mood before a training course | 41.42 | 9.01 |
| Mood after a training course | 43.59 | 8.14 |
| Mood – differences | 2.17 | 4.88 |
| Attitude to training programs | 8.00 | 1.59 |
| NPS – willingness to recommend the training vourse | 9.28 | 0.76 |
| <i>Instructor Performance Evaluation</i> | | |
| Ability to build a contact with a group | 4.80 | 0.49 |
| Ability to activate a group | 4.80 | 0.43 |
| Substantial preparation for a training | 4.83 | 0.41 |
| Knowledge about the specifics of participants' work | 4.76 | 0.51 |
| Ability to communicate information | 4.75 | 0.47 |
| Readiness to support participants | 4.70 | 0.49 |
| Flexibility to adjust a training to a group | 4.87 | 0.34 |

Source: authors' research

for independent samples. In the course of analysis, we found that the Kolmogorov–Smirnov test turned out to be statistically significant for all the variables entered, which means that the distributions of the tested variables significantly diverged from normal distribution. For this reason, we decided to perform the analysis based on nonparametric tests for variables concerning instructor performance evaluation and based on parametric tests for the remaining variables.

According to the hypothesis 1 we assumed that activating the instrumental function of complaining would be conducive to the process of learning the training material to a greater extent than activating the cathartic function and to a greater extent than no activation of complaining (the control group). While according to the hypothesis 2 it was assumed that after the activation of the instrumental function of complaining, mood will be higher than in the case of activating the cathartic function. In the first stage of testing the relationships between variables, we investigated the correlations of the length of service, attitude to training courses, and willingness to recommend the course to others with differences in mood and knowledge test scores. We correlated the score in the knowledge test taken before and after the completion of the course with sociodemographic variables. The analysis using Pearson's r , whose detailed results are presented in Table 3, revealed no statistically significant differences.

Next, we performed the same kind of analysis for the relations between the mood, as the dependent variable and sociodemographic variables. Analysis using Pearson's r , whose results are presented in Table 4, revealed a positive correlation however marginally significant between the difference in mood in the instrumental function condition and attitude towards training courses ($r = .35$; $p = .085$). This means that the participants with the positive attitude towards training courses, might be more satisfied in the condition of instrumental function activation. Still, this finding should be verified with a larger number of participants to be sure about the result.

In the last stage of analyses, we performed a one-factor analysis of variance for independent samples, comparing the difference in the knowledge test scores before and after the training course across the experimental conditions.

The analysis showed that the mean difference in the knowledge test differed only slightly presenting a possible trend: $F = 2.416$, $p = .096$, which should be examined further. Tukey's post hoc analysis showed, at a trend significance level ($p = .081$), that the participants in the condition in which the instrumental function was activated achieved a greater increase in knowledge during the training course than the trainees in the cathartic function condition. But there can be observed the significant differences related to knowledge test scores obtained after

Table 3. Correlations of Age, Length of Service, Attitude to Training Programs, and Willingness to Recommend the Training Course With the Knowledge Test Score

| | | Knowledge Test instrumental function | Knowledge Test cathartic function | Knowledge Test control group |
|---|--------------------|---|--------------------------------------|---------------------------------|
| Age | Pearson's <i>r</i> | 0.00 | 0.02 | -0.01 |
| | significance | 0.992 | 0.918 | 0.963 |
| Length of service in general | Pearson's <i>r</i> | 0.07 | 0.03 | -0.04 |
| | Significance | 0.743 | 0.896 | 0.853 |
| Length of service in the current position | Pearson's <i>r</i> | -0.02 | 0.07 | -0.30 |
| | Significance | 0.942 | 0.737 | 0.158 |
| Attitude to training programs | Pearson's <i>r</i> | -0.29 | 0.13 | -0.32 |
| | significance | 0.160 | 0.520 | 0.124 |
| NPS – willingness to recom- mend the training course | Pearson's <i>r</i> | -0.23 | 0.02 | -0.31 |
| | significance | 0.273 | 0.925 | 0.143 |

Source: authors' research

Table 4. Correlations of Age, Length of Service, Attitude to Training Programs, and Willingness to Recommend the Training Course With Mood

| | | Mood instrumental function | Mood cathartic function | Mood control group |
|---|--------------------|-------------------------------|----------------------------|-----------------------|
| Age | Pearson's <i>r</i> | -0.06 | 0.23 | -0.14 |
| | significance | 0.768 | 0.242 | 0.519 |
| Length of service in general | Pearson's <i>r</i> | -0.06 | 0.27 | -0.11 |
| | Significance | 0.762 | 0.167 | 0.599 |
| Length of service in the current position | Pearson's <i>r</i> | 0.05 | 0.15 | 0.17 |
| | Significance | 0.816 | 0.444 | 0.440 |
| Attitude to training programs | Pearson's <i>r</i> | 0.35 | 0.29 | 0.27 |
| | significance | 0.085 | 0.147 | 0.210 |
| NPS – willingness to recom- mend the training course | Pearson's <i>r</i> | 0.07 | 0.15 | 0.13 |
| | significance | 0.741 | 0.446 | 0.556 |

Source: authors' research

a training course ($F = 4.443, p = .015$) – the trainees in the instrumental function conditions received higher results after a training course than the trainees in the cathartic function conditions. What is interesting, the control group also received higher results than the group in the cathartic function conditions.

At the same time, the result of the analysis turned out to be statistically significant in the case of difference in mood as the dependent variable ($F = 10.854, p < .001$). Tukey's post hoc analysis showed that in the condition

after cathartic function activation during the course, trainees' mood deteriorated compared to both the instrumental function condition ($p < .001$) and ($p = .016$). The difference between the instrumental function condition and the control condition turned out to be statistically non-significant ($p = .217$). But if we look at results connected with the mood measurement after a training course, we could observe only a possible trend ($F = 2.399, p = 0.098$). Detailed analysis results are presented in Table 5 and in Figure 2.

Table 5. Differences in Mood and Knowledge Test Scores Depending on Experimental Condition

| | Instrumental function | | Cathartic function | | Control group | | F | p |
|--|-----------------------|------|--------------------|------|---------------|------|--------|------------------|
| | M | SD | M | SD | M | SD | | |
| Knowledge test after a training course | 7.64 | 0.57 | 7.15 | 0.66 | 7.54 | 0.66 | 4.443 | 0.015 |
| Knowledge test – differences | 6.84 | 0.99 | 6.22 | 0.85 | 6.58 | 1.21 | 2.416 | 0.096 |
| Mood after a training course | 46.24 | 8.14 | 41.41 | 8.04 | 43.29 | 7.78 | 2.399 | 0.098 |
| Mood – differences | 4.80 | 3.94 | -0.74 | 4.46 | 2.71 | 4.59 | 10.854 | <0.001 |

M – mean; SD – standard deviation; F –ANOVA test result; p – significance

Source: authors' research

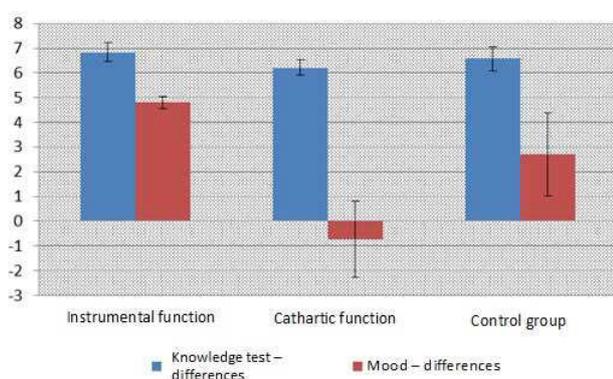


Figure 2. Mean differences in mood and knowledge test scores depending on experimental condition.

According to the hypothesis 3 we assumed that there are differences in instructor performance evaluation depending on experimental manipulation - at the reaction level, the instructor would be evaluated higher after applying a task activating the instrumental function of complaining than after free discussion sustaining the cathartic function of complaining and higher than in the control conditions. In the further stage of analyses, we compared mean instructor performance ratings across the experimental conditions. The Kruskal–Wallis analysis performed for this purpose, whose detailed results are presented in Table 6, revealed no statistically significant differences.

Discussion and Testing of the Hypotheses

The aim of the experiment was to compare two complaining functions – instrumental and cathartic one according to knowledge gaining results, participants' mood and training evaluation factors.

The study partly confirmed Hypothesis 1: Activating the instrumental function of complaining will be conducive to the process of learning the training material to a greater extent than activating the cathartic function and to a greater extent than no activation (the control group). The results have shown that activating the instrumental function of complaining might be more conducive to the

learning process than activating the cathartic function of complaining, as there are significant differences in results received by examined groups after a training course and an approaching level of significance was observed when we considered the differences in knowledge test scores taken before and after a training course. It can therefore be expected that, in the case of complaining during a closed training course, the instructor's application of a task that will make the trainees focused on problem solution will be conducive to the achievement of training objectives, whereas the outcome of learning will be weaker if the trainees engage in free discussion. What is important, we found no statistically significant difference between the group with activated instrumental function and the control group. This means that the activation of complaining in the context of instrumental function will not lead to an improvement in the learning process to a greater extent than in the case of no complaining. What seems to be the most interesting is the difference between the groups in which the instrumental function and the cathartic function were activated. Based on the theoretical section of the present study, it is reasonable to suspect that complaining generated an additional, not fully conscious goal in the trainees (Torój, 2016). In the case of the instrumental function this goal was fully achieved, because the participants reached specific conclusions and decided that the topic could be closed, which means cognitive closure took place. In the case of the cathartic function the goal was not achieved, because discussion only resulted in the topic that complaining related to becoming the center of the trainees' attention. The participants may not have felt the exhaustion of the conversation topic. It can therefore be inferred that their need for cognitive closure increased. Kossowska (2003) states that high need for cognitive closure promotes superficial analysis of information. By contrast, Torój (2016) points out that unachieved alternative goals may entirely absorb cognitive resources and that, as a result, the participants' focus may be on the current problem rather than on training contents. As postulated by Knowles (2009), the author of the model of adult learning, effective learning is that which includes factors such as: learner's self-deciding or learner's knowledge and

Table 6. Instructor Performance Evaluation Depending on Experimental Condition

| | Instrumental function | | Cathartic function | | Control group | | <i>H</i> | p |
|---|-----------------------|-----------|--------------------|-----------|---------------|-----------|----------|----------|
| | <i>M</i> | <i>SD</i> | <i>M</i> | <i>SD</i> | <i>M</i> | <i>SD</i> | | |
| Ability to build a contact with a group | 4.88 | 0.44 | 4.74 | 0.53 | 4.79 | 0.51 | 1.80 | 0.407 |
| Ability to activate a group | 4.76 | 0.52 | 4.81 | 0.40 | 4.83 | 0.38 | 0.13 | 0.937 |
| Substantial preparation for a training | 4.84 | 0.47 | 4.81 | 0.40 | 4.83 | 0.38 | 0.33 | 0.846 |
| Knowledge about the specifics of participants' work | 4.76 | 0.52 | 4.74 | 0.53 | 4.79 | 0.51 | 0.22 | 0.897 |
| Ability to communicate information | 4.76 | 0.52 | 4.70 | 0.47 | 4.79 | 0.41 | 0.70 | 0.704 |
| Readiness to support participants | 4.76 | 0.44 | 4.59 | 0.57 | 4.75 | 0.44 | 1.51 | 0.470 |
| Flexibility to adjust a training to a group | 4.84 | 0.37 | 4.89 | 0.32 | 4.88 | 0.34 | 0.28 | 0.869 |

M – mean; *SD* – standard deviation; *H* –Kruskall – Wallis test; *p* – significance

Source: authors' research

experience potential, and the proposed contents are meant to improve everyday functioning. Their inclusion will increase the likelihood of learners' commitment. Comparing the instrumental and cathartic functions again, it is possible to observe that the instrumental function includes the above factors, while the cathartic function does not. Doing the METAPLAN task, the participants in the study (activating the instrumental function) independently decided what conclusions were the most important (self-deciding). Additionally, during the discussion in small groups, they presented their knowledge and experience related to the subject of complaining (knowledge potential). As Smith (2017) claims, people want to be engaged in tasks which are relevant to their lives, which is why they are more effective in taking part in activities which improve themselves. Because the trainees work in the same organization and the subject of complaining is close to their everyday work, their observations may contribute to an improvement in functioning because they are embedded in the organizational culture and the possible procedural solutions. It can be expected that these factors will be enhanced sufficiently to result in an improvement of the entire learning process, also in the control group – the experiment showed that there is a difference, but it is not statistically significant.

Hypothesis 2 postulated the following: After the activation of the instrumental function of complaining, mood will be higher than in the case of activating the cathartic function. The analysis of results fully confirmed this prediction. The participants in whose case the instrumental function of complaining was activated had considerably higher mood after the training course (understood as the differences between the measurement before

and after a training course) than participants in the second group and did not differ significantly from the control group. Better mood and content might have been caused because the attendants might have felt trusted in their competencies and engaged in finding solutions which, according to Smith (2017), affects the feeling that a training is more precise. In the group with the activated cathartic function of complaining, we observed mood deterioration. Mood was much lower in this case than in the control group, too. To sum up, it is more beneficial to channel the complaining that occurs in a closed training course to the instrumental function rather than to the cathartic function, because in the former case trainees' mood improves and in the latter it deteriorates. In future studies it should be investigated if the video shown in the control group did not modify the participants' mood, making it more positive. Additionally, as predicted, after the activation of the cathartic function of complaining, the trainees referred to the subject of complaining in the further part of training course; the phenomenon of rumination did not occur in the group in which the instrumental function was activated. Since the cathartic function caused mood deterioration, what may have taken place is the phenomenon of negative mood being carried over (Murphy & Zajonc, 1994) to other areas of training, which led to lower learning outcomes. The following question should be asked: what caused mood deterioration in the case of cathartic function activation? Wojciszke and Baryła (2005a) explain it as stemming from the vicious circle of complaining, which is triggered by the expression of dissatisfaction, followed by the activation of negative mood, which in turn enhances willingness to express dissatisfaction again. The above confirms the absence of

a catharsis effect. The authors identify three mechanisms underlying this phenomenon. The first one is the self-sustenance of disapproval as a result of a facial or pantomimic expression. The second one concerns negative attitude arising as a result of the negative affect that precedes it. Finally, the third one illustrates that focus on dissatisfaction enhances it even more. In this way, in the present study, the discussion activating the cathartic function caused a negative state, which manifested itself through a facial or pantomimic expression. Then, by communicating their complaints, the participants induced negative affect, which was the basis for another utterance. Attention was preoccupied by dissatisfaction, which evoked even stronger dissatisfaction. The enhancement of negative mood may also have occurred as a result of observing a person who displayed negativism. The participants engaged in imitation and also started complaining, thus further enhancing their negative mood. The cathartic theory of aggression can also be cited. It argues that the “purifying” function is not confirmed. When an aggressive behavior takes place, tension decreases, but willingness to engage in aggressive behavior again does not perceptibly cease. When complaining is a response to actual dissatisfaction, tension is relieved but complaining does not cease: it is repeated for the purpose of relieving tension again. Another question deserves attention, too: What caused mood improvement in the group in which the instrumental function was activated? The issue of self-efficacy is worth looking into. As Bandura (2007) points out, high self-efficacy determines higher belief in one’s ability to cope with difficulties. The person is more self-confident, which positively influences self-esteem. In the present experiment, trainees faced with a difficult task issue found a solution on their own after the activation of the instrumental function. This may have contributed to an increase in the trainees’ self-efficacy and at the same time to an increase in their self-esteem. This in turn may have improved their mood. In further studies, trainees’ self-efficacy should also be measured.

Hypothesis 3 (At the reaction level, the instructor will be evaluated higher after applying a task activating the instrumental function of complaining than after free discussion sustaining the cathartic function of complaining and higher than in the control condition) was not confirmed. We found no difference between the groups evaluating the instructor’s work. The prediction that the trainees would appreciate the instructor’s active attitude was not confirmed. The trainees did not rate instructor performance until the end of the training course, which means there was plenty of space for other factors to come into play. A cognitive error may have occurred – namely, the recency effect. According to Brycz (2012), what determines the final evaluation of a message is the information given at the end. This effect is caused by retroactive inference. Another cause to consider can be positive inclination (Czapiński, 1994). This phenomenon is based on the assumption that people have a tendency to rate individual characteristics positively rather than negatively. This tendency is also visible in the individual’s

global evaluation. In the future it is worth reflecting on whether it would not be better to carry out instructor performance evaluation directly after the occurrence of complaining. An additional component of overall training evaluation was the Net Promoter Score (NPS). Also in this case we observed no difference between the groups with activated instrumental and cathartic functions and the control group. It is possible, however, to observe a pattern: those participants who had a more positive attitude to training courses scored higher in the knowledge test. Organizations should therefore take care to build the image of training programs, because this increases their effectiveness as regards the participants’ learning.

As the experiment has shown, activating the instrumental function of complaining is more beneficial during a training course than activating the cathartic function. Its results present practical implications for trainers planning the process of learning and development. They should not be afraid of complaining, but if it starts, they should shift participants’ attention to problem solving aspects using, for example, a metaplan. This may lead to achieving a greater increase in knowledge as well as improving mood.

There are some limits of the study. First of all, the small trend observed in the Knowledge test scores depending on experimental manipulation might be caused by a test difficulty which might have been too low for experienced Customer Advisors. The training content should have been completely new for respondents to define a knowledge increase. Another limitation of the presented study was that it was conducted among trainees from one organization only. One should therefore make allowances for this fact when generalizing the results to the whole population, because a particular organizational culture may modify the relationships we have found. In a replication of the study, a larger sample of respondents should be examined to achieve more unambiguous and explicit conclusions. In the future, research should also be conducted into the chronic tendency to complain, since this tendency can make it more difficult to activate the instrumental function of complaining. In further research, the cultural dimension of complaining should be examined. The results of the present study refer to the Polish conditions, part of which is a culture of complaining (Wojciszke et al., 1995; Czapiński, 1998). An experiment conducted in a culture where the norm is affirmation or the “keep smiling” principle may yield different results. This should be taken into account, because organizations with an intercultural environment, including various norms or complaining, are becoming increasingly popular.

Conclusion

The aim of the above empirical study was to find an answer to the question of which function of complaining is more conducive than others to the process of learning the training material, improves mood, and influences instructor evaluation at the reaction level. The complaining that takes place during the training course can be channeled by

the instructor into performing the instrumental function or the cathartic function. This has consequences for the entire training process. The activated cathartic function of complaining caused a deterioration in learning and mood among the participants. The instrumental function, by contrast, sustains positive mood and might be conducive to the learning process. Complaining does not lead to a change in the participants' evaluation of the instructor's work. Moreover, the participants who have more positive attitude to training programs learn more effectively. No studies linking the phenomenon of complaining to closed training programs have been conducted before, and our results provide a suggestion for instructors regarding which methods used during training courses will be the most effective.

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