

Introduction and Definition of Grievance:

A grievance is any dissatisfaction or feeling of injustice having connection with one's employment situation which is brought to the attention of management. Speaking broadly, a grievance is any dissatisfaction that adversely affects organizational relations and productivity. To understand what a grievance is, it is necessary to distinguish between dissatisfaction, complaint, and grievance.

1. Dissatisfaction is anything that disturbs an employee, whether or not the unrest is expressed in words.
2. Complaint is a spoken or written dissatisfaction brought to the attention of the supervisor or the shop steward.
3. Grievance is a complaint that has been formally presented to a management representative or to a union official.

According to Michael Jucious, 'grievance is any discontent or dissatisfaction whether expressed or not, whether valid or not, arising out of anything connected with the company which an employee thinks, believes or even feels to be unfair, unjust or inequitable'.

In short, grievance is a state of dissatisfaction, expressed or unexpressed, written or unwritten, justified or unjustified, having connection with employment situation.

Features of Grievance:

1. A grievance refers to any form of discontent or dissatisfaction with any aspect of the organization.
2. The dissatisfaction must arise out of employment and not due to personal or family problems.

3. The discontent can arise out of real or imaginary reasons. When employees feel that injustice has been done to them, they have a grievance. The reason for such a feeling may be valid or invalid, legitimate or irrational, justifiable or ridiculous.

4. The discontent may be voiced or unvoiced, but it must find expression in some form. However, discontent per se is not a grievance. Initially, the employee may complain orally or in writing. If this is not looked into promptly, the employee feels a sense of lack of justice. Now, the discontent grows and takes the shape of a grievance.

5. Broadly speaking, thus, a grievance is traceable to be perceived as non-fulfillment of one's expectations from the organization.

Causes of Grievances:

Grievances may occur due to a number of reasons:

1. Economic:

Employees may demand for individual wage adjustments. They may feel that they are paid less when compared to others. For example, late bonus, payments, adjustments to overtime pay, perceived inequalities in treatment, claims for equal pay, and appeals against performance-related pay awards.

2. Work environment:

It may be undesirable or unsatisfactory conditions of work. For example, light, space, heat, or poor physical conditions of workplace, defective tools and equipment, poor quality of material, unfair rules, and lack of recognition.

3. Supervision:

It may be objections to the general methods of supervision related to the attitudes of the supervisor towards the employee such as perceived notions of bias, favouritism, nepotism, caste affiliations and regional feelings.

4. Organizational change:

Any change in the organizational policies can result in grievances. For example, the implementation of revised company policies or new working practices.

5. Employee relations:

Employees are unable to adjust with their colleagues, suffer from feelings of neglect and victimization and become an object of ridicule and humiliation, or other inter- employee disputes.

6. Miscellaneous:

These may be issues relating to certain violations in respect of promotions, safety methods, transfer, disciplinary rules, fines, granting leaves, medical facilities, etc.

Effects of Grievance:

Grievances, if not identified and redressed, may adversely affect workers, managers, and the organization.

The effects are the following:

1. On the production:

- a. Low quality of production
- b. Low productivity
- c. Increase in the wastage of material, spoilage/leakage of machinery

d. Increase in the cost of production per unit

2. On the employees:

a. Increase in the rate of absenteeism and turnover

b. Reduction in the level of commitment, sincerity and punctuality

c. Increase in the incidence of accidents

d. Reduction in the level of employee morale.

3. On the managers:

a. Strained superior-subordinate relations.

b. Increase in the degree of supervision and control.

c. Increase in indiscipline cases

d. Increase in unrest and thereby machinery to maintain industrial peace

Need for a Formal Procedure to Handle Grievances:

A grievance handling system serves as an outlet for employee frustrations, discontents, and gripes like a pressure release valve on a steam boiler. Employees do not have to keep their frustrations bottled up until eventually discontent causes explosion.

The existence of an effective grievance procedure reduces the need of arbitrary action by supervisors because supervisors know that the employees are able to protect such behavior and make protests to be heard by higher management. The very fact that employees have a right to be heard and are actually heard helps to improve morale. In view of all these, every organization should have a clear-cut procedure for grievance handling.

Processing of Grievance:

The details of a grievance procedure/machinery may vary from organisation to organisation. Here, a four phase model is suggested. The first and the last stages have universal relevance, irrespective of the differences in the procedures at the intermediate stages.

The four stages of the machinery are briefly discussed here:

The level at which grievance occurs:

The best opportunity to redress a grievance is to resolve it at the level at which it occurs. A worker's grievance should be resolved by his immediate boss, the first line supervisor. The higher the document rises through the hierarchy, the more difficult it is to resolve.

Bypassing the supervisor would erode his authority. When the process moves to a higher stage, the aggrieved employee and the supervisor concerned may shift their focus to save face by proving the other wrong.

The substantive aspect of any of the grievances may thus be relegated and dysfunctional aspects come to the fore thus making it more difficult to settle the issue. In a unionized concern, the first stage of the procedure usually involves three people: the aggrieved employee, his immediate boss and the union representative in the shop/ department.

It is possible to involve the union in laying down the framework of the grievance procedure and thereafter restrain union involvement in the actual process, at least in the first two stages. The choice depends on the top management attitude and orientation towards the dynamics of union-management relations.

Supervisory role needs to be strengthened, with appropriate training in problem solving skills, grievance handling and counselling so that he can do much in reducing the number of grievances that get passed to higher stages in the machinery.

Unrealistic policies and expectations and lack of commitment for equity and fair play can cause problems in handling grievances at the lower level. Inadequate delegation of authority may also inhabit a supervisor's effectiveness in handling grievances at this level.

i. Intermediate Stage:

If the dispute is not redressed at the supervisor's level, it will usually be referred to the head of the concerned department. It is important that line management assume prime responsibility for the settlement of a grievance.

Any direct involvement by personnel department may upset balance in line-staff relations. At the intermediate level, grievance can be settled with or without union involvement. Excessive reliance on supervisor at this stage can jeopardise the interests of the employee and affect the credibility of the procedure.

ii. Organisation Level:

If a grievance is not settled at the intermediate level also, it will be referred to the top management. Usually, a person of a level not less than General Manager designated for the purpose will directly handle the issue.

By now, the grievance may acquire some political importance and the top leadership of the union may also step in formally, if the procedure provides for it and informally, if the procedure prohibits it. At this level it is very difficult to reconcile the divergent interests.

iii. Third Party Mediation:

If the grievance has not been settled bi-laterally within the organisation, it goes to a third party for mediation. It could be conciliation, arbitration or adjudication or the matter may even be referred to a labour court.

At this stage, the parties concerned lose control over the way the grievance is settled. In case of mediation (conciliation or arbitration) the mediator has no authority to decide, but in case of labour court or an adjudicator, the decision will be binding on the parties, subject to statutory provisions for appeal to higher courts.

Nature of Grievances:

A grievance is a problem and submitted by an employee or several employees of different types. It may be concerning a situation or likely to affect the terms and conditions of employment of one worker or several workers.

If a problem is related to and endorsed by all or majority of employees or if trade union submits a problem as a general claim it falls outside the scope of grievance procedure and generally comes under the purview of collective bargaining.

Thus, if an issue is wider in scope or general in nature it will be outside the grievance machinery. For example, if majority of employees or the trade union in an organisation demand wage revision, such issue does not come under the scope of grievance machinery and falls within the scope of collective bargaining.

In contrast if the workers of different departments submit to the management that their wage is not in accordance with the award given by Wage Boards and if they ask the management to correct the wage inequity such issue falls within the scope of grievance machinery.

Thus, a grievance:

- (a) Has a narrower perspective;
- (b) Is concerned with the interpretation of a contract or award as concerned to an individual or a few employees of different types. As such policy issues do not fall within the scope of grievance machinery.

Causes of grievances related to interpretation of all personnel policies: National Commission on Labour states that “complaints affecting one or more individual workers in respect of their wage payments, overtime, leave, transfer, promotion, seniority, work assignment and discharge would constitute grievances.

The causes of grievances include the interpretation of areas like placement, transfer, promotion, working conditions, payment of wages, allowances, overtime pay, victimization, medical benefits, housing facilities, increments, granting loans, conditions of work, leave, seniority, safety measures, fines, conditions” of work, suspension, break in service and-the like.

Causes of Grievances:

The causes of employee grievances include:

- (i) Demands for individual wage adjustments;
- (ii) Complaints about the incentive system;
- (iii) Complaints about the job classifications;
- (iv) Complaints against a particular foreman;
- (v) Complaints concerning disciplinary measures and procedures;
- (vi) Objections to the general methods of supervision;

- (vii) Loose calculation and interpretation of seniority rules, and unsatisfactory interpretation of agreements;
- (viii) Promotions;
- (ix) Disciplinary discharge or lay-off;
- (x) Transfer for another department or another shift;
- (xi) Inadequacy of safety and health services/devices;
- (xii) Non-availability of materials in time;
- (xiii) Violation of contracts relating to collective bargaining;
- (xiv) Improper job assignment; and
- (xv) Undesirable or unsatisfactory conditions of work.

Steps Involved in Employee Grievance Procedure!

Grievances are but natural in organisations. However like disciplinary problems, grievances also benefit none. Hence, there is a need for handling or redressing grievances. For this, most large organisations in India have, therefore, evolved a formal grievance procedure which enables an organisation to handle grievances satisfactorily. As a matter of fact, there are several substantive reasons for having a formal grievance procedure in an organisation.

The important ones are listed as follows:

- (i) It provides an established and known method of processing grievances and keeps this open.
- (ii) It brings grievance to the knowledge of management so that it can know and understand them to take necessary action for their settlement.

(iii) It gives an assurance to the employee that there is a mechanism available to consider his or her grievance in a dispassionate and detached manner.

(iv) Venting his grievance and being heard gives the employee a feeling of being cared for. This not only gets it off his chest”, but also helps him improve his morale and productivity.

(v) Involving several levels of organisation in the grievance procedure provides help on two dimensions. Firstly, the supervisor who is the first level in the grievance process cannot be bypassed by the worker. Secondly, involvement of several hierarchical levels in the grievance machinery releases exclusive reliance on the supervisor who can't jeopardize the interest of the employee. The supervisor knows his is a placatory role.

(vi) Involvement of various levels makes them know the kinds of issues that concern workers and managers.

(vii) Lastly, it checks the managers from taking arbitrary and biased actions against the workers as they know that their actions are subject to challenge.