

# HOW TO IDENTIFY AND DEAL WITH “WHINING CRY BABY (WCB) SYNDROME”

By Chief Patrick M. Kelly  
*Medley Police Department*

Hear it? That high-pitched, annoying, constant background noise? Maybe it's coming from the office next to yours, or from that little knot of people who have stopped to gossip in the hallway. Maybe it's even coming from ? could it be? ? you. One thing's for sure: It's getting louder and more persistent, and there's no getting away from it. If you can make out some of the words, they sound like: The department doesn't appreciate me. The department won't help me plan my career. Nobody ever tells me what's going on around here. The Chief is a jackass. My evaluation wasn't fair. My last raise was too long ago, and too small. Everything's changing too fast, and not for the better. It's not fair. This place stinks. And the granddaddy of them all, morale is lower than it's ever been. Waaaaaaah?

After discussions with many Chief Executive Officers, in both private and public sectors, it is amply clear that Whining Cry Baby (WCB) Syndrome is alive and well. WCBs, employees suffering from WCB Syndrome, must be identified and managed effectively. Unidentified and/or poorly managed WCBs can affect organizational productivity, employee morale and motivation, customer service levels, and most importantly the entire organizational culture. WCBs possess many, if not all, of the following attributes:

## **WCB Attributes**

Victim's Mentality - WCBs have acute victim's mentality. They are not responsible for their own negative behavior. Every negative outcome in their life is attributable to some other person(s) or some circumstance(s) beyond their control. When WCBs are challenged about questionable behavior, their reactions have become incredibly predictable and almost Pavlovian in nature. First, of course, the accused will deny being at fault and then, second, cleave almost immediately to the sequential steps of the "WCBs Defense": (1) I didn't do it; (2) Okay, I did it, but it wasn't a violation of policy, or there is no written policy; (3) Well, yes, I know it was a violation of policy, but everyone else was doing it too, and besides, I was doing less of it; (4) Yes, I did it, but the means you used to catch me were inappropriate; (5) You are only picking on me because I'm (fill in the blank). These forms of rationalization work very well, because WCBs do not have to accept responsibility for anything that goes wrong in their personal and professional lives. Conversely, they take full credit for all positive outcomes or successful results they are associated with. Simply put, WCBs believe other people are totally responsible for their failures, while WCBs are totally responsible for all their successes.

Tuned into Radio Station WIFM and WCBs are tuned into What's In it For Me (WIFM) 24 hours a day. They see themselves as the center of the universe and seldom consider how their actions impact others. This often manifests itself in their

suggestions for organizational improvement, which are usually self-serving or loaded with hidden agendas. WCBs continuously assert their individual rights, even if those rights trample on the rights of others, or most importantly on what is best for the entire organization. WCBs often believe that seniority or “time in grade” should be the criteria assigned the greatest weight in personnel decisions. They often say, “I’ve been here the longest, so I’ve earned the assignment or promotion.”

Apathetic - WCBs don’t get involved and always approach their duties and tasks in a reactive mode. They initiate little if any work activity. WCBs prefer traditional policing methodologies, and will often spend more time looking for ways to avoid work, than to simply complete the tasks as assigned. You will hear them saying, “It’s not my job,” “That’s not in my job description,” or “The only way to stay out of trouble around here is to do nothing.” WCBs are usually the least productive employees. They despise community-policing initiatives and may even sabotage these proactive problem-solving efforts.

Complaining Critics - WCBs are organizational critics. They are able to identify what is wrong with everything and everyone else, but spend no time assessing the individual they see in the mirror. Once WCBs complain about and/or criticize some issue or person, and place blame on it, they feverishly move to another issue. The only level of satisfaction they ever get is bringing people down to their level of anger and unhappiness. After doing this, they celebrate their hard won battle and quickly step over the lives they have ruined.

### **Why Do WCBs Exist?**

First, many WCBs began their behavior as children. It began with the words “Mommy and daddy, I want?” and goes on and on and on. Of course it usually takes place in public, before the largest number of strangers possible. A Kansas State University professor, who specializes in parent-child relationships, says that whining is what’s called an irrelevant behavior that parents are responsible for creating. Dr. Charles Smith says, “A child whines because they have learned that kind of repetitious, aggravating behavior gets them what they want. Parents have to realize they created this behavior and now they’re going to have to suffer through it.”

Unfortunately, this irrelevant behavior can continue through adolescence and into adulthood. And just like the parent, the organization is responsible if this irrelevant whining behavior continues to persist. Remember basic psychology. When a person repeats a behavior pattern, that person is getting a payoff. You must avoid the old clichè “The squeaky wheel gets the most oil.” This “oil,” or payoff is simply reinforcing the WCB and his or her negative irrelevant behavior.

Second, we are a society that values individual “rights” above all else. Psychologist Carol Tavris, in her landmark book, *Anger: The Misunderstood Emotion*, explains our tendency to whine: “The individualism of American life, to our glory and despair, creates anger and encourages its release. For when everything is possible, limitations are

irksome. When the desires of the self come first, the needs of others are annoying. When we think we deserve it all, reaping only a portion can enrage.” Ah, “reaping only a portion,” you may say, misstates the case. WCBs don’t want the whole pie, just a few more crumbs.

American organizations are simply microcosms of American society. All employees come to work with unique “individual” personalities, interests, preferences and rights. Successful employees recognize the need to balance their individual rights with the rights of the organization’s internal and external stakeholders. Unfortunately, WCBs have not recognized the need to sacrifice some individual “rights” for the good of the collective organization and its customers. Those folks whom New York City behavioral scientist Deborah Bright calls “entitleists” - a polite word for WCBs - often express their outrage in passive-aggressive ways, including being chronically late or absent, stealing from the company, backstabbing co-workers or bosses, or simply withdrawing - not taking risks, not suggesting solutions, not going the extra mile, in effect just waiting around to be fired. Need we point out that these are not great career-building strategies?

Finally, our level of self-esteem affects virtually everything we think, say and do. It affects how we see the world and our place in it. It affects how others in the world see and treat us. It affects the choices we make - choices about what we will do with our lives and with whom we will be involved. It affects our ability to both give and receive praise and recognition. And, it affects our ability to take action to change things that need to be changed. WCBs, like many people in American society, suffer from low self-esteem. What separates WCBs from others suffering from low self-esteem? WCBs do not understand or have not yet accepted their low self-esteem. In fact WCB attributes, described earlier in this article, are all manifestations of low self-esteem. They don’t have time to look into the mirror objectively, because they are so busy criticizing and condemning others. Unfortunately, WCBs surround themselves with other WCBs. There is truth to the old adage, “Misery loves company.” WCBs commiserate with each other on a daily basis. In fact, it was from the depths of this WCB commiseration that this author broke free from the chains of this life and career-crippling syndrome.

### **How to Effectively Deal with WCBs**

One day two frogs were playing together, hopping over each other on a park bench. Suddenly, as they neared the edge of the bench they both fell off and into a pail of milk, which was on the ground. The pail was only filled halfway so the two frogs had a difficult time trying to get out. Eventually their commotion and cries for help drew a crowd of other frogs who gathered at the edge of the bench. When the crowd saw how hopeless their situation was, they began to jump up and down, swinging their legs and yelling, “Give up! Give up! You will never make it out! It’s hopeless!” When one of the frogs in the pail saw them and heard what they were saying, he knew they were right. He didn’t see the point of trying any longer, so he laid back and slowly disappeared into the pail of milk and drowned. The other frog looked up and saw the crowd jumping up

and down and yelling and this made him more determined to get out. So he started to swim around and around, faster and faster. Eventually his churning around made the milk begin to harden. He was able to get a foothold and jump out of the pail of milk and save his life.

Oh “by the way” I forgot to tell you that the second frog - the one that triumphed and saved his life? was DEAF! You see, because he was deaf, he did not hear all the negative remarks from the crowd. He saw the other frogs jumping up and down, waving and yelling to him and he thought they were encouraging him to try harder!

The first, and most important strategy, for dealing effectively with WCBs is in this story. If you and your organization are going to succeed, you need to be like the second frog. You need to ignore the WCBs and their comments because they will discourage you and drag you down. Getting sound advice from people who have achieved success is one thing. Listening to WCBs is another. Remember basic psychology. Ears, or people listening, are a payoff for WCBs. As long as there is an audience (payoff) for their negativity, they will continue to cry. Waaaaaa? A more diplomatic way of utilizing this strategy is to become “selectively impolite.” Be remote when the WCB complains. Only show interest when he or she stops complaining or says something positive.

The second strategy is to dismiss the WCBs negative comment. Say something like “You may be right,” and change the subject. A leading management psychologist says that often the best way of handling something that really bothers you is not to oppose it, but to align yourself with it. This will totally confuse and disorient the WCB. Of course, it will be YOUR fault when the WCB becomes confused and disoriented.

Third, don’t get flustered. If the WCB appears to enjoy upsetting you, keep your cool. Any emotional reaction from you becomes a payoff for the WCB.

Next, be direct. Tell the WCB, “Your complaining bothers me. I can’t handle that kind of talk right now.” Or, “It bothers me when you only talk about the negative side of things.” Interestingly, as much as WCBs complain, they never seem to leave. This is because subconsciously they realize how great things really are in their current organization, or because no one else will hire them. If things are really that bad, invite them to apply elsewhere. Be cautious though, they will view this as a threat in their negative mindsets.

Fifth, jump in first. There was an office manager who had to deal with a WCBs constant complaining about her husband. One Monday morning, he asked her, “What did the MORON do to you this weekend?” Startled, she replied, “Why are you saying that about my husband?” He said he’d listened to her complaints for years and decided the man had to be a sadistic monster. She responded, “He’s not that bad,” and stopped complaining.

Sixth, pay attention to results. The supervisor in a printing shop said an old-time printer

was always pessimistic about special printing jobs, insisting that each job was impossible. The supervisor would tell him to go ahead anyway and in every case the job worked out. If negativity is a good employee's security blanket, let it be.

Seventh, ask for the complaints in writing. Then read them back to the WCB. Some WCBs don't know how negative they sound. Of course, many WCBs will refuse to reduce their complaints to writing because they don't want to spend time looking for solutions. They fear formal documentation of their complaints, because then they may be asked, "How do you think we can address your complaint(s)?" This question leads to the final strategy for dealing with WCBs.

Finally, ask for clarification and empower the WCB to propose viable solutions to their complaints. Tell the WCB to describe the problem and clarify the desired outcome(s). Ask what plans the WCB has for handling the situation. Such questions will slow pathological WCBs down and force them to think about positive actions. Then again, they may respond with, "It's not my job!"

### **Closing Comments**

One of life's greatest frustrations is dealing with WCBs who absorb your energy and drag you down. Most managers find constantly complaining, whining employees more difficult to work with than incompetent employees. "Basically, most people with positive attitudes have a negative attitude about negative attitudes," says psychologist Al Siebert, who teaches executives how to deal with difficult people on the job. "Negative people catch the blind spot of your basic optimistic managerial type. These upbeat executives are very judgmental and feel negative people are defective human beings who have flawed personalities. Their position is that everything would work out if only those negative people would get an attitude transplant." Reality dictates, however, that most WCBs are not going to change as long as there are organizational "payoffs" (i.e., specialized assignments, promotions, and training opportunities) for their behavior. Eliminate rewards for inappropriate behavior and become selectively "DEAF" around WCBs, and you will become the organizational cure for "WCB Syndrome."