



THIS WEEK'S FEATURE

The Problem With Your Complaint May Be You

Lt Col (Ret) Ryan Sweazey

President & Founder, Walk the Talk Foundation

Justice may be written in regulations, but it is carried out by people.

In the labyrinth of military and federal administrative processes—EO complaints, IG investigations, Article 138s, and the like—we cling to a comforting myth: that the system operates as a flawless machine, blind to personalities, tone, and human frailty. File the paperwork, cite the regulation, and justice grinds forward inexorably. Reality, however, is messier. The recipient of your complaint is not an algorithm. They are a person. And if you approach them with condescension, pedantry, or outright hostility, do not be shocked when your case receives the bare minimum of effort—or less.

This is not a defense of bureaucratic laziness. The system *should* function impartially regardless of how politely or abrasively a complainant presents their grievance. But it doesn't. Human nature persists even inside government offices. An investigator handed a rambling, accusatory screed that drips with superiority will, consciously or not, prioritize other cases. One laced with unnecessary lectures on regulatory minutiae may trigger eye-rolls and half-hearted follow-through. This isn't fair, but it is predictable. People defend their dignity, even in cubicles.

The deeper issue compounds this human element: complainants dramatically underestimate the sheer labor required to build a credible case. Far too many service members discover this only after their efforts collapse. They arrive at our door declaring, "I've already filed X, Y, and Z to no avail." A review of the record then reveals the uncomfortable truth. The complaint was never properly filed. Or it went to the wrong recipient. Or it missed the strict timeline. Or it failed to cite specific violations with supporting evidence. Often it was some combination of all these failures.

No one provides formal training on drafting airtight complaints because the bureaucracy prefers volume over quality—and perhaps because a certain level of friction discourages all but the most determined from challenging the system.

This is by design. The IG does not hold your hand. Equal Opportunity offices exist to investigate, not to ghostwrite your narrative. No one provides formal training on drafting airtight complaints because the bureaucracy prefers volume over quality—and perhaps because a certain level of friction discourages all but the most determined from challenging the system. The burden of research, organization, citation, and procedural precision falls entirely on the complainant. You must master the regulations. You must understand the timelines. You must present your case in language that informs rather than alienates.



Many approach this process as if indignation alone suffices. It doesn't. A strong complaint is a professional document: clear, factual, well-organized, and respectful of the process even when criticizing outcomes. It anticipates counterarguments. It avoids emotional language that invites dismissal as "personality conflict." This does not mean sanitizing legitimate outrage. It means weaponizing competence.

THE PATH FORWARD DEMANDS DISCIPLINE.

- 1. Always remain professional.** This may be the most difficult part, especially when you are being slow-rolled, stalled, or frustrated by general incompetence. Yet a calm, measured tone is your most powerful asset; it denies others the easy excuse to dismiss you as the problem.
- 2. Do the homework before filing.** Where exactly does this complaint go and how? What specific rules or laws were violated? Be precise—vague assertions die in the inbox, so too do poorly-framed complaints.
- 3. Keep it succinct.** All cases can be boiled down to the cold hard facts. The elements of reprisal, for example, are just four; cite them directly and move on.
- 4. Don't opine, lecture, or ramble.** No one has time to read a manifesto, and such flourishes are not salient to the case. Stick to what happened, when, and why it violated established standards.
- 5. Get help.** Walk the Talk Foundation is an excellent starting point for those navigating these waters. If the matter is purely administrative, you can try a military defense counsel, but you're probably wasting your time frankly—their bandwidth and incentives often lie elsewhere.
- 6. Set expectations.** This is a long slog. There are very, very few quick victories. Accept that restitution will come slowly, if at all. Managing your own timeline prevents burnout.
- 7. Set realistic goals that are within your control.** Demanding "I want him or her fired" is the antithesis of effectiveness. Instead, resolve that "I will do everything in my power to document the violations thoroughly and follow every proper channel." That is achievable. Setting goals that only others can deliver is a recipe for endless consternation.

The consequences of getting this wrong extend beyond a single failed complaint. Poorly executed filings create paper trails that can haunt future efforts. They reinforce perceptions that the complainant is difficult or uninformed. They waste time—yours and the system's—making legitimate issues harder to address when finally presented correctly.

None of this excuses genuine wrongdoing or unresponsive officials. Accountability mechanisms exist for a reason, and bad actors should face scrutiny. But self-awareness must precede righteous indignation. Before asking why the system failed you, examine whether your approach invited that failure.

The problem with your complaint may indeed be you—not because your underlying grievance lacks merit, but because navigating these processes demands more than being right. It demands being effective. In a world of imperfect institutions staffed by imperfect people, effectiveness is the only reliable path forward.

Lt Col (Ret) Ryan Sweazey is the President and Founder of the Walk the Talk Foundation. All articles are posted on [LinkedIn](#) and online at walkthetalkfoundation.org. The Star Chamber podcast is available on [Apple](#), [Spotify](#), and [YouTube](#).

TAKE ACTION

Sign the petition demanding Congress create an independent DoD Inspector General.
Over 3,000 signatories and counting.

[SIGN NOW →](#)



Contact Congress

Find your [Representative](#) or [Senator](#) and send them this issue.

The Star Chamber

[Apple](#) · [Spotify](#) · [YouTube](#)

Get Advised

Facing retaliation or an IG process? We can help.

Follow & share: [LinkedIn](#) · [Instagram](#) · [Facebook](#) · [X / Twitter](#) · Forward this issue

The Walk the Talk Foundation is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit. Your donation is 100% tax deductible. [Donate at walkthetalkfoundation.org](#) →

Questions or tips: francescagraham@walkthetalkfoundation.org or in the comments.