

## TOWARDS EFFECTIVE WORKER GRIEVANCE HANDLING: SOME REFLECTIONS

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### ABSTRACT

*This paper seeks to provide a comprehension of Worker Grievance Handling (WGH) which is a crucial aspect of human resource management and industrial relations in an industrializing country in the new millennium. WGH is meant for accepting and resolving grievances of workers with the purpose of enhancing industrial peace. Effective WGH has its unique significance for good labour relations, worker motivation and worker productivity. The paper has its main area of focus on three key dimensions of the WGH, namely, grievance policy, grievance procedure and grievance practice. As an agenda of action for effective WGH, a few suggestions are also given. The paper may be of assistance to firms in a newly industrialized country in enhancing their worker grievance handling and also to those who are interested in understanding WGH for research purposes.*

### ABSTRAK

*Kertas ini cuba memberi huraian kepada cara Pengendalian Ketakpuashatian Pekerja (PKP), iaitu satu aspek yang amat penting dalam pengurusan sumber manusia dan perhubungan industri di negara-negara perindustrian baru memunculkan dalam milenium baru ini. PKP adalah bertujuan untuk menerima dan menyelesaikan hal-hal ketakpuashatian pekerja supaya kedamaian industri dapat dipertingkatkan. PKP yang berkesan boleh mewujudkan suasana perhubungan industri yang baik dan meningkatkan motivasi dan produktiviti pekerja. Kertas ini memberi focus kepada tiga dimensi penting PKP, iaitu polisi ketakpuashatian, tatacara dan amalan ketakpuashatian. Beberapa cadangan dikemukakan sebagai agenda tindakan untuk*

*meningkatkan keberkesanan PKP. Kertas ini boleh digunakan oleh firma di negara-negara perindustrian baru muncul untuk memantapkan proses pengendalian ketidakpuashatian pekerja dan juga bagi mereka yang berminat untuk memahami PKP bagi tujuan penyelidikan.*

## INTRODUCTION

No “employee-less” organizations can be seen even in a highly advanced high-tech economy where growing electronic power is replacing the manpower. Employees are very important assets in any organization. In any organization whether it is private or public, profit or non-profit, manufacturing or service, generally, there are two categories of employees: managerial employees and non-managerial employees. The managerial employees design the gamut of productivity and efficiency but the results of which depend largely on the performance of non-managerial employees or workers in general. For this paper the term ‘worker’ or ‘employee’ refers to a non-managerial employee. Indeed, workers play important roles in maintaining and improving organizational productivity. Thus, Human Resource Management (HRM) recognizes the need and importance of Worker Grievance Handling (WGH). It attempts to accept and resolve grievances of workers with the purpose of maintaining industrial peace. The main objective of the present paper therefore is to provide a systematic understanding of effective WGH in an industrializing country in the context of a dynamic new millennium. Ostensibly, the approach of this paper is reflective and descriptive. In specific terms, this paper attempts to address the following interrelated questions:

1. What is WGH?
2. Why is it important?
3. What are the key dimensions and elements involved in WGH?
4. What actions under each dimension are to be followed towards effective WGH?

It is hoped that this paper may be of value to all the firms in a newly industrializing country in general for the purpose of improving their WGH. The paper may be useful also for those who are interested in getting an understanding of WGH for their research purposes.

## THE CONCEPT OF WGH

As a logical starting point, it is worthwhile to look into some pertinent aspects of the concept of grievance from the available literature. In this regard, our approach is selective rather than comprehensive. As 'grievance' is an abstract term, defining it distinctly is therefore rather difficult. Different authors have defined the word grievance in various ways. For example, Davis (1971, p. 34) defines it as *"any real or imagined feeling of personal injustice which an employee has concerning his employment relationship"*. On the other hand, Yoder and Staudohar (1982) have defined a grievance as a written complaint filed by an employee and claiming unfair treatment. In the view of Jucius (as in Tripathi, 1992, p. 422), the term "grievance" means *"any discontent or dissatisfaction, whether expressed or not and whether valid or not, arising out of anything connected with the company that an employee thinks, believes or even feels, is unfair, unjust or inequitable"*. The International Labour Organisation (as in Singh *et al.*, 1989) defines that a grievance is a complaint of one or more workers in respect of wages, allowances, conditions of work and interpretation of service stipulations, covering such areas as overtime, leave, transfer, promotion, seniority, job assignment and termination of service. Salamon (1987, p. 480) defines a grievance as *"a formal expression of individual or collective employee dissatisfaction primarily, but not exclusively, in respect of the application or non-application of collective agreements, managerial policies and actions or custom and practice"*. A grievance is a complaint-whether valid or not- about an organizational policy, procedure, or managerial practice that creates dissatisfaction or discomfort (Salipante & Bouwen, 1990).

In the view of Mohamed (1992), there are three terms associated with 'grievance', i.e., Complaint, Grievance and Dispute. Mohamed (1992, p. 2) defined:

*"Complaint is a dissatisfaction which the employee brings to the attention of his immediate superior. Grievance is a formal complaint by the employee concerned which he brings to the attention of his immediate superior or in accordance with the grievance procedure as outlined in the collective agreement between the company and the union. A dispute is an unresolved grievance which involves the company and the union and is referred to the Ministry of Human Resources for conciliation or arbitration."*

Definitions of complaint and grievance given by Mathis and Jackson (2000) are compatible with the definitions given by Mohamed. Mathis and Jackson (2000) have defined a complaint as an indication of employee dissatisfaction that has not been submitted in writing and a grievance as a complaint that has been put in writing and made formal. A grievance is deemed to have arisen once the employee makes a formalised complaint and it may be made by an individual, or a group directly affected, or through a representative- for example, a spokesperson or trade union representative (Pettinger, 1999). Thus, it seems that an informal grievance is a complaint in verbal and a formal grievance is a complaint in writing. If a complaint goes unresolved, it becomes a grievance, and if a grievance goes unresolved it becomes a dispute. A complaint involves the grievant and his/her immediate superior while a grievance may involve the grievant, managers (immediate superior, immediate superior's superior and/or human resource manager). A dispute involves the firm (General Manager and Human Resource Manager) and the union.

It is possible to note that grievance is a word that involves worker discontent or dissatisfaction having the following features:

- (a) It may be real based on actual injustice or imagined based on assumed injustice, which has not occurred from the perception of management.
- (b) It may be expressed distinctly or not.
- (c) It may be informal (verbal) or formal (written).
- (d) It may arise out of something relating to employment/organization/work/job.
- (e) It may be individual or collective: An employee or a group of employees feels/feel or believes/believe that an injustice has been done by a manager or several managers in the organization.
- (f) The grievant or grievants or a representative on behalf of the grievant(s) may make it.
- (g) It may be termed as a complaint or a grievance or a dispute.

Thus, a grievance is defined as any discontent or dissatisfaction arising from a feeling or a belief of injustice felt by an employee or a group of employees in connection with the work environment (Opatha, 1994). Basically WGH refers to accepting and solving grievances effectively (in order to maintain good Labour-Management Relationship (LMR) and employee motivation) and efficiently (minimising wastage of resources including time of handling).

## IMPORTANCE OF WGH

A grievance that is informal or formal, real or imaginary, may be a severe source of conflict. Hidden dissatisfaction grows and soon arouses an emotional state that may be completely out of proportion to the original complaint (Mathis & Jackson, 2000). Dissatisfaction of one worker may convert into a dissatisfaction of several or many workers. This may create feelings of resentment against the management and may ferment an opposition leading to confrontation. Frustrations and perceptions of unfair treatment have been associated with strikes (Bluen, 1994). Frustration among employees who believe that they are not treated fairly can lead to a variety of counter productive behaviours such as work slowdowns or sabotage (Spector, 2000). Therefore, it is very important to handle grievances in any firm.

Grievance handling contributes to the quality of the labor relations' climate within the workplace (Gantz & Whitehead, 1982). The absence of an effective grievance mechanism can lead to increasing employee unrest (Sharma, 1987). Kochan and Katz (1988) argue that grievance resolution is an important component of the industrial relations system and, more generally the relationship between management and unions. According to the findings of the two empirical studies done by Knight (1986a & 1986b) grievance resolution contributes to the quality of the relationship between the parties (union, management and workers). Research studies (Ichniowski, 1986; Ichniowski & Lewin, 1987) indicate that grievance-filing rates are negatively correlated with workplace productivity and/ or product quality in unionized manufacturing plants.

According to Ichniowski (1986) there are two types of effect i.e. "displacement effect" (employee work time diverted from production tasks to grievance processing) and "worker reaction effect" (reduced worker effort as a reaction to the perceived unfair administration of the contract). When a worker is suffering from a grievance his/her attention to work will reduce and also his/her motivation to work will be affected so resulting in reduced worker productivity. Mamoria (1991, p. 832) observes:

*"Most grievances seriously disturb the employees. This may affect their morale, productivity, and their willingness to cooperate with the organization. If an explosive situation develops, this can be promptly attended to if a grievance handling procedure is already in existence."*

If grievance handling system is effective, aggrieved employees can relieve their feelings of dissatisfaction/injustice with their employment, promptness in the handling of grievances is ensured and larger problems (like strikes) are prevented from occurring in future by solving smaller problems early. These contribute to creation of trust and co-operation between union and management, and then to favourable Labour-Management Relationship (LMR). Thus, WGH is of importance for any organisation to enhance employee motivation, productivity and LMR.

## DIMENSIONS OF WGH

In this paper WGH is conceptualized as a system which basically consists of three dimensions such as grievance policy, grievance procedure and grievance practice. Salamon (1987, p. 287-8) defines:

*"A policy may be defined as a statement of objectives and the strategy for their achievement... A procedure may be defined as an operational mechanism, which deals and regulates the manner in which a specified issue is to be handled... A practice may be defined as a set of decisions or actions which are made in response to a given problem or situation."*

As these definitions seem to be clear and interesting they are applied in this paper. Based on the definitions given by Salomon grievance handling is defined as a system of statement of objectives and the strategy for their achievement (grievance policy), operational mechanism (grievance procedure) and actions made in relation to handling grievances (grievance practice).

## GRIEVANCE POLICY

The purpose of a grievance policy should be to establish the organizational climate, objectives and manner in which managers (individually or collectively) will be expected to respond to any grievance or dispute presented by employees (Salamon, 1987). A good policy should contain/have the following:

1. Acceptance of the right of employees, individually or collectively through their recognized union, to present grievances to management (Salamon, 1987).

2. Employees should be given a fair hearing by management covering any grievances they wish to raise (Armstrong, 1998; Salamon, 1987).
3. Adoption of formal Grievance Settlement Procedure (GSP) (Salamon, 1987).

Adoption of formal GSP is indispensable for several valid reasons. If an explosive situation develops, this can be promptly attended to if a grievance handling procedure is already in existence (Mamoria, 1991). It gives a reassurance to a grievant by the mere fact that there is a mechanism available to him/her (Monappa & Saiyadain, 1979). According to Armstrong (1985) a well designed and a proper GSP provides a channel or avenue by which any aggrieved employee may present his grievance; a procedure which ensures that there will be a systematic handling of every grievance; a method by which an aggrieved employee can relieve his feelings of dissatisfaction with his job, working conditions, or with the management; and a means of ensuring that there is some measure of promptness in the handling of the grievance.

Thus, the dimension of grievance policy is considered to have four elements i.e., purpose, acceptance of the right of workers and their unions to present grievances to management, fair hearing by management, and adoption of formal GSP. It is important to have a GSP for proper LMR.

## GRIEVANCE PROCEDURE

GSP should specify how and to whom employees can raise a grievance; spell out the stages through which a grievance should go and spell out the rights of representation on behalf of the grievant employee (White, 1989). The procedure should be formal requiring a written statement in respect of the grievance. There seems to be strong merit in preparing, for completion, a special grievance handling form (White, 1989). In this regard, Chruden & Sherman (1985, p. 407) wrote:

*“Requiring a written statement reduces the chance for various versions of the grievance to appear because of lapse in memory, forces the employees to be more rational and to think more carefully about their grievances resulting in that grievances which stem from trivial complaints or feelings of hostility are less likely to be pursued beyond the first step.”*

According to Thomson and Murray (1976) the adoption of a staged approach seems to be more appropriate and the purpose of such an approach is to ensure that those with effective authority within the two parties can be reached in an orderly way and also to provide for a review of decisions by a new level of authority at each succeeding stage. The number of stages/steps involved in the GSP varies depending on the size and nature of the organisation. Mamoria (1991, p. 833) notes:

*“The details of the grievance procedure vary from industry to industry and from trade union to trade union because of the variations in the size of organisations, in trade union strength, in the management philosophy, in the company traditions, in the industrial practices and in the cost factor. The procedure may have as few as two steps or as many as ten, depending on the size of an organisation. In small plants, it may involve no more than three steps. In medium and large organisations there may be five or six steps, with minor variations.”*

Thus, a GSP contains a number of steps arranged in a hierarchy. The number of steps involved in the GSP varies according to the size and the nature of the organisation. A good GSP allows for external reference where all the possible internal stages have been exhausted. Chruden and Sherman (1980, p. 407) wrote:

*“GSP should give a clear indication in terms of a provision that the union and the management can refer the grievance to voluntary arbitration or mediation if no agreement is possible in the final step of the procedure. The process by which a grievance is resolved by an impartial party who hears all the facts pertaining to it and recommends a solution for both parties to follow is called arbitration. When the agreement/ procedure does not provide for arbitration and the deadlock cannot be broken, then the union will either have to drop the grievance or resort to some form of economic pressure such as a strike or a slowdown.”*

The final step in virtually all grievance procedures is arbitration that calls for a neutral third party to settle matters that can not be resolved by bilateral discussions between union and management representatives (Kleiman, 2000). This third party is to be accepted by the parties involved in the dispute. Therefore, a good procedure provides for arbitration as the final step.



According to the Indian Institute of Personnel Management (as in Singh *et al.*, 1990, p. 355-6) the following principles should be observed while laying down a GSP.

1. A grievance should be dealt with in the first instance at the lowest level; that is, the employee should raise his grievance with his immediate superior. It may be simple to settle it on the spot and that will be the end of it. Even if it cannot be settled at that level, the superior will know what is happening. This is necessary not only to maintain his authority but also to prevent him from being aggrieved, as he will certainly be, if he is by-passed and later hears of the complaint from his own superior.
2. It must be made clear to the employee what line of appeal is, so that, if he cannot get satisfaction from his immediate superior, he may know the next higher authority to which he can go.
3. Since delay causes frustration and tempers may rise and rumours spread around the work, it is essential that grievances should be dealt with speedily.
4. The grievance procedure should be set up with the participation of the employees and it should be applicable to all in the organisation. It should be agreed that there would be no recourse to the official machinery of conciliation unless the procedure has been carried out and there is still dissatisfaction.

Tripathi (1992) has noted that the GSP must be acceptable by everybody. In order to be generally accepted it must ensure (a) sense of fair-play and justice to the worker, (b) reasonable exercise of authority to the manager and (c) adequate participation of the union. Time limit should be placed at each step and it should be rigidly followed at each level for speedy settlement of a grievance (White, 1989 & Tripathi, 1992). White (1989) notes that it should be possible to exceptionally waive the time limits under mutual consent if both parties agree that circumstances of the case may prove hard to ascertain, or where relevant personnel are not readily available. The time limit may range from 2-5 working days at the earlier stages to 1-2 weeks at the later stages (Salamon, 1987). A good GSP should be simple so that an average employee is able to understand it (Singh *et al.*, 1990). Mamoria (1991, p. 845) stresses that:

*"If it is necessary for any worker to leave the department during working hours on call from the labour/personnel officer or any other officer of the established grievance machinery, the prior permission of his superior should necessarily be obtained. Subject to this condition the worker should not suffer any loss in wages for the work-time lost in this manner."*

Based on the above, a good GSP must have the following characteristics:

1. Formality
2. Suitable Number of Stages
3. Line of Appeal including arbitration as the final step
4. Time Limits
5. Participation
6. Simplicity
7. Acceptance By All the Relevant Parties

These can be considered as **elements of the dimension of grievance procedure.**

## GRIEVANCE PRACTICE

In respect of practices, Salamon (1987) points out three good practices of grievance handling. They are:

- The manager has to establish the nature and reasons for the grievance/s accurately.
- The manager has the responsibility for stating and explaining the organisation's position on the issue, which is the cause of the grievance.
- The manager should be concerned with identifying alternatives and arriving at a mutually acceptable compromise.

Walter (1980) states that management should hold grievance discussions privately and should treat the union representative as an equal. Management should consult the union. Consultation with union stewards was found to contribute to resolution of grievances (Knight, 1986a, 1986b). According to Hackett (1994) following practices are good for proper grievance handling:

- Publicise the existence of the procedures through written statements or briefing sessions.

- Advise individual employees or their representatives what they should do if they wish to lodge a grievance.
- It is usually preferable for those hearing the appeal not to have been involved at earlier stages.
- Recording and monitoring the progress of grievances and disputes and preparing periodic board reports indicating the number of grievances and level at which they were settled.

Generally line managers are not very competent in solving or responding to employee grievances, and therefore training of grievance handling becomes necessary. To train line managers how to respond to complaints brought under these procedures, and in particular, how to conduct grievance interviews/advising line managers on how to respond is a good practice for proper grievance handling (Hackett, 1994). Several steps are important for responding to a grievance and these should be covered in any training in respect of grievance handling. Seven steps have been recommended to be followed by the manager in responding to an employee grievance (Whetten & Cameron, 1998 & Kleiman, 2000). These are: (1) Make an appointment to discuss the problem (unless the problem is urgent and must be addressed) so that full attention can be given to the grievance and a chance can be given to the grievant to calm down if he/she is feeling very angry or upset; (2) Do not become defensive, even if the complaint has no foundation; (3) Let the grievant blow off some steam; (4) Set ground rules, if necessary; (5) Redirect from accusations to specific behaviors (asking for details about actions that are the basis for the complaints); (6) Agree with some aspect of the complaint without accepting all of its ramifications; and (7) Ask for suggestions of acceptable alternatives from the grievant. Also tactics such as 'give in (accepting that the manager is wrong)', 'escape from the situation (transferring the grievant to a place that does not remind the grievance and where no body is aware about the grievant's problem)', and 'Use the grievant in more responsible task' may be useful for reducing mental frustration of the grievant. Any training should impart knowledge and develop skills with regard to the above steps and tactics.

Management should be open-minded. Open-minded negotiation skills can help supervisors to create integrative solutions to shopfloor conflicts. This was found empirically (Tjosvold, Morishima & Belsheim, 1999). According to Peterson and Lewin (1982) and Lewin (1983) grievance

procedure effectiveness can be measured by the degree to which high quality, creative solutions are reached in a speedy manner.

Based on the above, under the dimension of grievance practice ten elements are identified and these include publicizing the existence of grievance policy and procedure through written statements or briefing sessions; training line managers in grievance handling /advising line managers on how to respond; advising individual employees or their representatives what they should do if they wish to lodge a grievance; holding discussions privately; treating the union representatives as equal; stating and explaining the organisation's position on the issue, which is the cause of the grievance; management is concerned with identifying alternatives and arriving at a mutually acceptable compromise; consulting union; have individuals who have not been involved at earlier stages for hearing the appeal and recording and monitoring the progress of grievances and disputes.

### AGENDA FOR ACTION: 21-POINT-PROGRAMME

Figure 1 given at the end of the paper indicates the dimensions and elements of worker grievance management. For an effective WGH system, a blueprint is suggested as outlined in the following "Agenda for Action", which essentially is a 21-Point-Programme, thus:

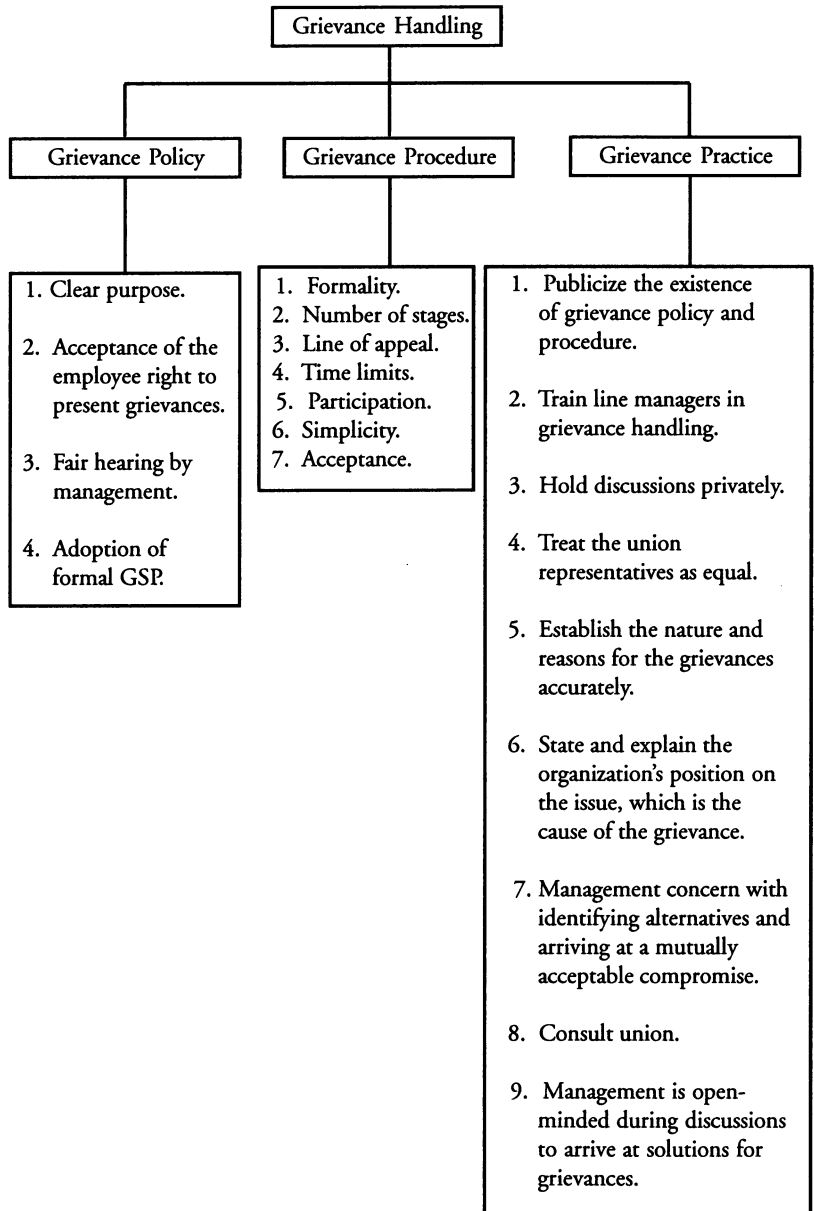
1. State clearly the purpose(s) or objectives to be achieved from grievance management in a policy statement.
2. Accept as a policy the right of workers, individually or collectively through their recognized union, to present grievances to management.
3. Mention as a policy that employees should be given a fair hearing by management covering any grievances they wish to present.
4. Formulate a formal written grievance settlement procedure in the firm unambiguously.
5. Establish a requirement in the grievance settlement procedure that workers should submit a written statement about the grievance.
6. Specify in the grievance settlement procedure clearly how and to whom workers can raise a grievance.
7. Spell out in the procedure clearly the stages through which a grievance should progress.
8. Specify in the procedure clearly and distinctly time limits for each stage in order to have a speedy solution.

9. Accept clearly the right of union representative.
10. Allow arbitration or conciliation under the grievance settlement procedure, if a satisfactory solution is not found even at the final stage.
11. Allow the union to participate in formulating or revising the procedure.
12. Establish the nature and reasons for the grievances accurately and fairly.
13. Stating and explaining clearly and adequately the organization's position on the issues which are causes of the grievances.
14. Be concerned with identifying alternatives and arriving at mutually acceptable compromises.
15. Hold grievance discussions privately.
16. Ensure the management treats union representatives as equal.
17. Make sure that the management consults union in grievance handling whenever possible.
18. Have individuals who have not been involved at earlier stages for hearing the appeal.
19. Create and maintain a good culture where the management is found to be open-minded during discussions to arrive at solutions for grievances.
20. Train supervisors and managers how to handle and respond to worker grievances fairly and acceptably.
21. Record and monitor the progress of settlement of grievances.

### CONCLUDING REMARKS

Effective Worker Grievance Handling is one of the major issues that organisations in newly industrialized countries have to face in the new millennium. WGH develops, implements and maintains continually a fair and acceptable grievance management system in order to achieve organisational goals including employee motivation and good LMR. Effective WGH saves time, efforts and expenses substantially by avoiding or at least reducing the number of disciplinary problems, appeals, grievances and conflict. Key dimensions of WGH include grievance policy, grievance procedure and grievance practice. There are several courses of actions to be followed by any type of formal organisations in relation to the three dimensions for effective WGH.

**Figure 1**  
Dimensions and Elements of Grievance Handling



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