

6 ESSENTIAL STEPS NEEDED TO RESOLVE COMPLAINTS



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Learning

THE ESSENTIALS OF SUCCESSFUL COMPLAINTS HANDLING

Welcome!



When you have to deal with a complaint it can be really stressful, can't it?

"If you follow this formula with every complaint you deal with, you will greatly increase your chances of success."

"You can learn how to become much better at handling tricky interactions with customers."

Complaints handling can sometimes be seen as a "mystic art". Some people think that only those who are experts at it can be expected to succeed and most of those can only be found in specialist areas such as regulators or complaints services.

Fortunately, for you and for me, this is a myth. Handling and resolving complaints well is actually fairly simple, because in essence it is a process. Applying a process is enhanced by simply learning some key skills.

You can learn how to become much better in handling tricky interactions with customers so that complaints are simply reduced in number or don't even happen at all. This will give you a competitive edge, build your reputation, and allow you to justify higher prices for your products and services.

My strategies for successful complaints resolution are:

1. **Awareness** – make sure all your team know what a complaint is, how to recognise it and how to respond. This means your business has to define and share what a complaint actually means to you.
2. **Acknowledge** – get the customer on-side quickly; show you are taking the complaint seriously. Acknowledge the issue and the emotions expressed behind the complaint. From experience this is rarely done by staff.

“Get your staff to think of handling resolutions rather than complaints.”

“There are six elements to look at in every complaint...”

3. **Respond** – don’t be defensive, be positive. You can resolve this and usually you will learn how to become much better in handling tricky interactions with customers to achieve a win/win outcome for you both. You will need to use some key skills to excel at this.
4. **Follow through** – keep your promises and check to be sure that the customer regards the resolution you’ve agreed with them as the end to the complaint.
5. **Learn** – if the complaint can be avoided next time by a change in procedure, communication or advice don’t lose that lesson.
6. **Mindset Change** – this can be transformational. Get your staff to think of handling resolutions rather than complaints. Resolution is a wonderful, positive word and avoids the negative connotations and emotions that the word ‘complaint’ can bring with it.

In every complaint whether it is a really complex issue or a wrangle over price or service, considering these six elements will give you the edge to resolving that complaint.

Here’s more detail and guidance to help you:

1. Awareness of complaints

“What is a complaint?”

“Any expression of dissatisfaction, whether justified or not.”

One of the biggest challenges to excellent complaints responsiveness is getting the team to be fully aware of what a complaint is, and what a complaint is not. Your business will have procedures for dealing with a complaint and they should be up to date and well understood by all. If your complaints handling procedures are gathering dust then it is time to blow the covering off and review them. Your team need to understand how complaints resolution will work in your business so they need to read and understand these procedures. If you find that your procedures are old and out-dated we can help improve them and support you with embedding these procedures so the staff are at ease with them and can easily call upon them if they need to.

“What is a complaint?”

“It is not just a minor grumble.”

Many complaints escalate because they are not recognised when they first occur. Sometimes dismissed as minor grumbles, what first appear as minor complaints can sour a relationship over time. These minor grumbles can build up and the issue that appears to cause the complaint may not be the root cause but simply the final straw.

So your team need to be on the look-out for any expression of dissatisfaction, whether justified in your view or not, so that can it be dealt with as a complaint. After all that is the definition of a



complaint given by the British Standards Institute.

“Excellent communications and joined up thinking across your team are essential.”

Awareness of complaints will also drive a real desire in the team to have excellent and clear communication with all of your customers. Complaints about price, service, and durability can be minimised by managing expectations at the outset. Making sure your team have excellent communication skills and that your thinking is joined up across the team are essential strategies.

Real awareness is the starting point for great complaints resolution.

2. Acknowledging complaints

“Apologise that something has gone wrong, as a way of showing concern and understanding.”

Having made sure that you are on top of the complaints awareness issues, you will want to think about how you acknowledge complaints when they are received.

Complaints arise when people don't get the service they expect. It's vital to give customers who make a complaint a helpful response. The reasoning behind this is that by demonstrating to the customer that you are taking their complaint seriously and want to resolve it you can really make all the difference. There is a significant body of management writing



including Dr Steven Covey (of “Seven Habits of Highly Effective

“Acknowledging the complaint ...will show you are serious about it.”

People” fame) which advocates striving deeply to understand the other person’s point of view. It is often inappropriate to try and persuade a customer to do what you want; instead it is better to understand what they want, and then try to help them achieve it.

Acknowledging the complaint, explaining what you are going to do to resolve it and telling the complainant when to expect resolution will show you are serious about it. If the matter is complex it may take some time to investigate, particularly if you have to deal with third parties etc. If that happens make sure the customer knows that they haven’t been forgotten; don’t keep them in the dark. Keep them informed.

Take a lesson from another sector that’s still relevant today: the Healthcare Commission Report on Complaints in the NHS in February 2009 found:

“When first acknowledging a complaint a genuine apology can establish empathy.”

“We know that patients and their representatives make complaints to healthcare organisations for three major reasons:

- They want an explanation of the events leading to their complaint.
- They want an apology.
- They want an assurance that the same mistakes will not be made in the future.”



When first acknowledging a complaint a genuine apology can establish empathy. Remember an apology is not the same as an admission of guilt or liability. Good practice is to say: "I'm sorry you

have felt the need to complain, let's see how we can resolve it."

3. How to respond

"Speed is often of the essence."

Speed is often of the essence when resolving complaints - the longer it takes the more difficult it becomes.

A complaint made in person if not dealt with quickly can be the subject of a written/email complaint. Then chaser letters follow, more letters to other authorities follow that. All of this activity is usually because the complaint is not being dealt with quickly enough.

The reason why customers can and do behave in this way is that it feels to them like they are not being taken seriously if their complaint takes a long time to be dealt with. Worst of all is when you are investigating and working on a complaint but the customer doesn't know and simply assumes you are ignoring them. So please don't fall for that particular trap.

"If you haven't asked the customer what would resolve the complaint, make sure you do so."

So you need to move quickly if a complaint is received. I have experienced a Director in one of our client organisations receiving a complaint, putting it in his briefcase to deal with,



then going off on holiday and forgetting about it until his return. He was filled with great intentions but lost two weeks with nothing happening other than the

customer was becoming even more annoyed. Make sure your processes can deal with the complaint, even when you are not there. Colleagues can deal with it, gather information, and keep in touch with the customer.

A big issue here is to try to avoid becoming defensive. It may feel like an assault on your professionalism or an attack on you personally. In reality a customer has not received what they expected in some way and that needs dealing with professionally. Differing expectations between your people and the customer on an issue are often the root cause. So recognising that this might be more about communication than simply a defect in the product or service is half the battle.

If you haven't asked the customer what would resolve the complaint when you first received it make sure you do before offering a solution. Often long rambling complaints cover every minor issue as a way of raising the importance of the complaint to make you take notice. Solving one of these might simply be the key. You won't know unless you ask.

If the complaint is justified offer a fair solution, which might involve action to put things right if you have made a mistake.

"Try to avoid becoming defensive."

"Saying how sorry you are that something has gone wrong can

make all the difference."



When offering a solution to a customer keep in mind these key points:

“They want an explanation of the events leading to their complaint.

They want an apology.

They want an assurance that the same mistakes will not be made in the future.”

*“Don’t risk
having it restart
by not doing
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4. Follow through on complaints

It’s crucial that having solved the complaint with a resolution don’t risk having it restart by not doing what you said you will do. Keep your promises and make a courtesy call to the customer to make sure that the matter is resolved. If it isn’t, keeping your head down will make matters worse. It will start all over again so it makes sense to deal with it proactively now.

Saying how sorry you are that something has gone wrong can be all that is needed to turn a complainant into an advocate.

*“Saying how
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5. Learn from complaints

Having dealt with the complaint take a chance to review what went wrong. Borrow from the project management discipline and undertake a 'lessons learned' review. Get your team to consider the complaint, what caused it, how it was handled and learn from that to improve your customer experience. That way, the effort put

Into resolving that complaint will be an investment in your business and professional reputation rather than simply an overhead.

Review your complaints procedure. Procedures often read well but it is not until they are used that any flaws or omissions become apparent. Polishing the procedure up and making sure the team are familiar with it will be a good investment.

"Resolution is a wonderful positive word, a frame of mind."

6. Mindset Change

Remember! This can be transformational. Get your staff to think of handling resolutions rather than complaints. Resolution is a wonderful, positive word isn't it and it avoids the negative connotations and emotions that the word 'complaint' can bring with it. We've had such good feedback on this one point alone on our



training courses. It really does make a difference.

“Love complaints and you will be repaid with lower costs and happier customers.”

So there we have the basics to successful complaints handling: Six essential strategies to ensure your complaints resolution is successful. You can start today in your business making sure that your complaints handling is the best it can be, using my strategies to help you.

These fundamentals if you apply them rigorously will make a huge difference to your complaints handling.

And finally...

“Resolving complaints is a core skill.”

Imagine what would happen to your business if you started to make these changes in the way you deal with complaints... how will that affect your team performance? If you are in the private sector, your profits would increase and your costs would reduce. Either way, you'll save time, reduce operating costs and build your reputation.

Always remember that many customers give up complaining at the first hurdle, or decide it is not worth bothering with. The problem goes away because so does the customer. However, you can guarantee they'll tell around ten, perhaps twenty other people about your organisation and what they think of you! The result? Loss of business and reputational risk.



If you are looking for complaints handling training, for staff or managers, in any sector, regulated or non-regulated, then please get in touch and I will personally have a chat with you to explore alternatives.

Call me on 0845 165 6269 or email: alison@leadinglightlearning.com

Kindest regards

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