

Risk Incidents and Complaints Management



Complaint Handling Tips for Staff

Instructions:



It is important for staff to be prepared to implement your complaint and feedback policy and procedures. Staff who are likely to be receiving complaints and may be involved in responding to a complaint will require some detail about your procedures to give them confidence in their approach.

Complaint handling training for staff can boost their commitment to and confidence in the complaints system while at the same time demonstrating that management take the system seriously.

Below is a handout covering the 4A's approach to complaints which is also available in animation (see iPDF for link). Both these resources can be used for induction of staff, staff training and can be displayed as a reminder to staff and encourage best practice.



Complaint Handling Tips for staff



Don't
panic



Don't
take it
personally



Take a
breath

Every organisation that deals with participants should always be open to feedback on how it might further improve the quality of the services being delivered. If you think about it, we all expect to be able to let people know when we're not happy with a service we've received.

A complaint is just one way this feedback might be given.

Two things that can help with your initial reaction are to put yourself in the person's shoes and to remember to respond to the person rather than react to the complaint.

Perhaps it's best summed up as a case of empowering people to speak up, paying attention to what they are saying and learning from their feedback without getting too alarmed that you received a complaint in the first place.

Respecting the relationship

In recognition of the relationship you have with the person who has made the complaint, it is important to understand that how you respond to the complaint is just as important as whether or not the complaint is resolved.

Even if you can't fully resolve the complaint, it is critical that the person who made the complaint feels that they've been listened to; that their opinion was valued and that you did everything you could to address their concerns. In this case, the process really is as important as the outcome.



How do I respond to a complaint?

The Four A's of successful complaint resolution:
Acknowledgement, Answer, Action, Apology.

Acknowledgement

In many respects this first step is the most important of the Four A's as it often sets the tone for the rest of the process. Having stepped out of their comfort zone to make a complaint, people want to feel that you've understood their concern and how the situation has affected them.

There is no perfect way to give a positive and respectful acknowledgement in all situations but some basic steps that can help include the five step 'LEARN' process:

Listen – Genuinely listen to the concerns of the person without interruption. Look for the positive intention behind the person's issue and behaviour.

Empathise – Use your body language and/or voice to create an environment where the person can feel comfortable talking with you. Be conscious of whether you are feeling defensive and how this can be perceived.

Acknowledge – Acknowledge how the situation has affected the person who made the complaint. Where relevant, acknowledge where the service response could have been better.

Rectify – Ask the person who made the complaint what would rectify the complaint for them. What would a good outcome look like for them?

Notify – Notify the person promptly and regularly of the steps you will take, in response to their complaint but don't commit to things you can't do.

"A good acknowledgement delivered with respect, the right body language and tone will indicate to the person that you are not about to oppose them and that you see their feelings as legitimate. Acknowledgement is about validating emotions." G. Furlong, The Conflict Resolution Toolbox



Answer

People typically want to know why something has or has not happened or why a decision was made. This is important to their ability to understand and process what has happened and to move on to resolving their concern.

Answers should include a clear explanation of the event / decision relevant to the concern raised.

Action

People want you to fix or at least take steps to address their concerns.

Sometimes you may not be able to fix the concern raised but may be able to initiate actions that will assist in preventing it occurring again. This can be just as important to the person as it validates their concern.

It's a good idea to agree to an action plan with the person who raised the complaint. The plan should include things like:

- What will be done?
- Who will do it and when?
- How will we communicate our progress?
- How will we check that things are on track?

It's a good idea to then follow up with the person who made the complaint to make sure they are satisfied with what action you have taken. This can also be a good opportunity to seek feedback on their experience of the process you used to respond to their complaint.

Actions often cannot fix the past, but they can show that the concern raised was taken seriously and offer reassurance that the issue is less likely to happen again.

Apology

An apology if warranted, can either be part or the whole of the outcome people seek when they make a complaint.

Care should be taken about who might give the apology and what form it should take. Apologies don't have to be particularly fancy or over the top but they do need to be genuine. Whilst a genuine apology can be an important step in resolving a complaint, a poorly given apology can actually make the situation worse.

Some of the key elements of a 'good' apology are:

- Timeliness
- Sincerity
- Being specific and to the point
- Accepting responsibility for what occurred and the impacts caused



- Explaining the circumstances and causes (without making excuses)
- Summarising key actions agreed to as a result of the complaint

A genuine and timely apology is a powerful healing force and a way to separate the past from the future, to put things to rest and get on with any new arrangements agreed to.



Making a record

Ensure you make a record of any complaint, outcome sought and what occurred. If you need to pass it onto someone ensure this is done in a timely and confidential manner.