

Effective Complaints Management

7: Resources

INFORMATION FOR NORTHERN TERRITORY PUBLIC SECTOR AGENCIES:

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This Fact Sheet forms part of a series designed to assist public sector agencies to ensure they have appropriate procedures in place to effectively manage customer complaints.

The Fact Sheet series has been kindly made available by the Queensland Ombudsman. It has been adapted for use in the Northern Territory.

For further information or advice, please contact the Northern Territory Ombudsman's Office on 08 8999 1818.

The link between resources and effective complaints management

Information technology, modern communication equipment and a sufficient number of trained and empowered staff are essential elements of an effective complaints management system. A manual to guide staff is good practice, but without a commitment to the necessary supporting resources, your complaints system may not provide the business improvements that are a hallmark of effective complaints management systems.

The role of staff in a complaints management system

People are the backbone of an effective complaints management system. This is the single most important resource in the complaints handling process. It is imperative that staff are appropriately selected and trained, and provided with adequate support networks, to ensure that complaints are dealt with effectively (see Fact Sheet 8, Personnel and Training, for further information).

Given the diversity of complaints received by agencies, the professional competence and operational knowledge of complaints staff are crucial. They should be familiar with the various components of your agency to be able to locate the people who can provide them with information and solutions.

There should usually be a primary contact point for staff and complainants to manage the complaints through the internal process. A complaints coordinator ensures timeliness, quality and consistency in how complaints are dealt with, including correspondence and data collection.

Staff should be receptive to customer complaints and welcome feedback. They should be skilled listeners, have excellent interpersonal skills, be problem-solvers and be adept in conflict resolution.

It is also important for management to be aware that staff handling complaints over a prolonged period of time may be susceptible to stress. One option for alleviating stress is to rotate staff through complaints handling areas, which not only reduces the likelihood of stress, but also helps to develop broad skills. Specific stress management assistance should also be made available.

Complex complaints

Your system should ensure that complex complaints are moved from the frontline to more senior officers.

When matters are referred up, sufficient information should be provided to the senior officer so that he or she can easily determine those who have been involved in the matter previously. A summary of the complaint should also be provided so the complainant is not forced to repeat the details (see sample complaints forms attached to Fact Sheet 11, *Business Improvement*).

When referring matters up, remember to inform complainants why another officer is handling their complaint and provide the relevant contact details.

Effective systems also ensure the senior officer's decision is communicated to the original decision-maker. This encourages prevention of similar situations arising in the future.

Useful tip

As staff are the most important resource in the complaints management process, it is imperative that sufficient resources are allocated to training and support.

EFFECTIVE COMPLAINTS MANAGEMENT - RESOURCES

Limited resources? No problem!

Improving your agency's customer service capability through effective complaints management may require resources to be allocated to develop new systems or improve existing procedures. However, if competing priorities delay decisions about investing time or money in effective complaints management systems, agencies lose valuable opportunities to improve administrative practices that arise when meaningful information is regularly available.

If resources are tight, make strategic decisions to use existing resources creatively to maximise the benefits of customer feedback. The key to effective complaints management is to ensure that data is collected in a way that can be interpreted for use to improve administration. While information technology can assist this process, paper-based systems can also be a valuable, and cost-effective, resource.

Consider appointing a community liaison officer if you experience a number of complaints over a short period about a service or initiative and work through the problems quickly. Agencies concerned about the cost of managing customer complaints should be aware that the cost of handling complaints generally rises steeply as complaints proceed to higher levels within the organisation. Therefore, resolving complaints quickly and efficiently at an early stage is an effective way to manage limited resources.

Resources make complaints process easy

Information technology and modern communication equipment help staff to respond easily and quickly to customer complaints. The following resources will also ensure a high level of service for customers:

- a detailed complaints handling procedures manual and reference material readily available for staff
- a toll-free complaints hotline that connects directly to the complaints section or designated officer so customers are not transferred to several points within the office
- an answering machine for messages to be left when the complaints section is unstaffed or busy
- hands-free telephone equipment
- a user-friendly complaints handling environment with low levels of noise and interview facilities
- information about complaints stages and processes and how to contact your complaints area included in common communication resources, such as leaflets and website
- an on-line complaints form and guidelines for customers on how to complain
- assistance for customers unable to write due to language or literacy difficulties
- specialised equipment or interpreter services to remove communication barriers for people who suffer from deafness or other disabilities.

The role of data collection in the complaints management process

A good electronic complaints management system will allow you to record, answer and monitor customer complaints to ensure you respond to customers in a timely way. This will also enable your agency to easily keep customers informed of the status of their complaints and gather useful information that can be channelled towards improving services.

Technology allows complaints information, such as the type and subject of complaints, to be recorded and analysed and findings given to management to allow strategic decisions to be made.

Critical variables that should be captured to identify problems, ways of avoiding repetition of complaints and assist future decision-making include:

- nature of complaint
- mode of complaint (e.g. oral, written, electronic)
- responsible officer, service area location, practices or procedures identified
- action taken, response time and outcome
- recommendations for procedural improvements
- complaints of a similar nature.

In-built tracking mechanisms will also assist the complaints coordinator to monitor the progress of matters that are being handled by other staff. This is particularly important for complaints handled at a regional level and facilitates the capturing of important information on the central database.

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