

Effective Complaints Management

8: Personnel and Training

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.

A spirit of cooperation

All staff have a role in managing complaints. Agencies with complaints-friendly cultures provide training in complaints management processes and encourage a positive attitude towards complainants.

Complaints should be easy to make to helpful staff. People who demonstrate the following attributes are ideal to handle people's concerns:

- non-judgemental
- sensitive to cultural, literacy or other differences
- accept complaints as a normal part of life
- recognise complaints are an opportunity to improve services
- do not consider the complaint a personal attack
- respect the complainant's privacy and opinions
- good communication and mediation skills
- skilled problem-solvers.

Effectively dealing with complaints can help defuse customer anger and prevent frustration. People with minor complaints often want their problems resolved immediately, so it is good practice to ensure staff who interact with customers have the skills and knowledge to do this. Training in accepting oral complaints is essential and, for more complex issues, staff should be able to help customers put their complaints in writing if necessary.

Practical tip

Dealing with difficult situations can be very stressful. Ensure you cater for the professional, psychological and social well-being of staff dealing with complaints.

Provide guidance

Staff need to know how and where to refer complaints. Make sure your policy and procedures for managing complaints:

- outline roles and responsibilities within the agency
- detail complaints referral and recording mechanisms
- specify preferred timeframes for dealing with and responding to complaints
- detail general remedy options.

Choose complaints reviewers carefully

Complaints that are not resolved to the complainant's satisfaction in the first instance, or those that are not appropriate to be handled through the frontline process, may progress to internal review.

The success of this process depends to a large extent on the people charged with the role. The public's perception of the independence of the reviewer – given the likelihood of some scepticism about a review conducted internally – is crucial.

Ideally, the person undertaking the review should:

- be clearly identified and not change throughout
- be unbiased
- be an officer more senior than the original decision-maker
- have had no previous involvement in the matter
- not be the primary decision-maker's supervisor
- have the necessary breadth of expertise to deal with matters likely to be raised or be able to access advice from experienced colleagues
- have access to technical and legal advice if required
- not have a conflict of interest (e.g. no personal interest in the outcome).

Complaints reviewer's authority

To meet the community's expectation of a thorough internal review, agencies need to ensure that the reviewer has appropriate authority to look at matters afresh. The reviewer must be able to consider new information submitted by the applicant or that the reviewer thinks relevant to properly decide the matter on its merits, as well as:

- review findings of fact and professional opinions offered by or on behalf of the agency
- apply or vary the application of agency policy
- alter the primary decision on the merits of the case
- recommend changes to legislation or policy.

Practical tip

Ensure the process for selection and appointment of a complaints review officer is included in your policy and procedures.

Maximise public confidence

To maximise public confidence in your complaints system, complaints reviewers should be senior to and independent of the primary decision-maker.

Problems of public confidence in the outcome of the review can arise if the primary decision-maker was a senior executive, e.g. Chief Executive. In such cases, it may be necessary to appoint an independent external person to conduct the review to overcome perceptions that the reviewer may not be prepared or able to overturn high-level decisions.

The public expect a thorough review of their concerns. If the reviewer is authorised by senior management to look at matters afresh, including new information, complainants will be more confident in the process and less likely to feel the need to seek external review (refer to Fact Sheet 13, *External Review*).

To ensure the best outcome for all parties, the reviewer should also be able to apply or vary the application of agency policy or decline to apply policy if the circumstances of the case justify it.

Training and taking care of staff

Provide training to staff dealing with complaints about the system and opportunities to improve their repertoire of skills. Ongoing training helps to demonstrate management's support for the value of this challenging role. Consider training in time management, dispute resolution, analytical thinking, customer relations, handling difficult people and stress management.

Caring for staff is critically important. Providing regular breaks and allowing complaints handlers to debrief when necessary, perhaps through a network of peer support, may help prevent unhealthy stress and 'burnout'.

The benefits of effective peer support networks for staff in similar work environments include:

- an improved sense of self-control and coping in stressful situations
- support and ideas from colleagues
- assistance to view stressful situations more positively
- improved communication and teamwork
- encouragement to use improved coping strategies in the future.

Similarly, consider how you can support staff who are the subject of a complaint. People may become distressed, anxious or defensive and should be informed of avenues of assistance, such as your human resources section or a professional counselling service.

Raise staff awareness

Finally, as all staff have a role in complaints handling, it is important to promote efficient and effective management of complaints and to provide information on how complaints contribute to service improvement. Consider:

- including essential information during induction programs or prior to changes to your complaints management system
- providing regular refresher training
- selecting staff for specialised roles who understand the value of complaints and have a good approach to customers
- demonstrating your support for complaints review officers
- training to meet the different needs of staff
- providing adequate resources
- reviewing and updating training materials and methods every few years or after significant development.