Twenty tips for managing complaints

Summarised by Andrew Gibbons

1. Review your existing feedback and complaint management practices and decide what is working (keep or modify this), and what is not (adapt or dump that).

2. Gather in, and learn from best practices within other organisations, and study relevant National Standards. Don't just transplant others' good ideas and procedures without considering whether or not they will fit your organisational culture.

3. Do all you can to develop within the organisation a genuine belief that a complaint truly is a gift. This may require considerable time and visible senior management commitment.

4. Do what it takes to educate and inform your managers and front-line staff in particular about the purpose, benefits and management of your policy.

5. Understand that to shift from the current position to the desired one will take time, and that many will be cynical or downright opposed to the new ideas. Criticism and concerns need to be listened to, but you may need to confront direct opposition with firm action to ensure the changes for the better are not thwarted.

6. Recognise that a lot of 'complaints' are not officially made, and encourage front-line people to record and pass on all issues that cause customers to feel irritation, and/or inconvenience. This means regular and serious questioning of front-line staff who know what annoys customers, but who are rarely if ever asked about this.

7. Don't just sit on complaints and feedback. Have a regular review of the issues that irritate your customers, involving sufficiently senior people to initiate corrective actions.

8. Accept that many staff at all levels will be reticent to seek, record, and pass on complaints, for fear of being personally blamed for customers' irritations, or for highlighting the deficiencies of others. Always go hard on your processes not your people, and don't let 'blame cultures' become established.

9. When a complaint initiates a change for the better, or when corrective action has been taken in response to one, make sure the customer knows what their complaint prompted, and keep all relevant front-line staff informed too.

10. Recognise that internal customers (colleagues) have legitimate causes for complaint and feedback, so don't leave them out.

11. Make certain that a very senior individual has specific, personal responsibility for the management and development of the complaints procedures.

12. Train and develop all appropriate staff in the skills of complaint management and processing, and accept that it's not just something that they should be left to deal with as part of their job. They need support and help to manage this well.

13. Recruit and select your key customer-facing people with great care. The 'right' people make all the difference when it comes to the sensitive and professional management of complainants.

14. Remember that the vast majority of legitimate complaints are not made. The most credible research on this suggests that only 1 in 26 customers with cause to, can be bothered to make the effort to complain (Lee 1990). So expect the level of complaints to rise as you are felt to take them more seriously before if at all, they decrease.

15. It is true that what starts out as a negative experience for a customer can, via professionally managed service recovery, be turned into a positive one, converting would-be 'terrorists' into really useful 'apostles'.

16. Treat written complaints with particular concern and urgency, as these require time and effort few are prepared to invest, thus indicating the complainant is very serious about the issue/s in question.

17. It can help to ask the complaining customer what they want by way of redress. Such a request can take them aback somewhat, as many haven't even thought about this. Unless you ask you may not know, or assume incorrectly just what they want - if anything.

18. Ensure your customer-facing people are genuinely empowered to take appropriate decisions on their own initiative, and that they will do this confident of the support of management.

19. Make it easier to complain by looking for, and removing barriers that inhibit customer feedback. This may for instance mean relying less on paper processes.

20. It's not easy, but try to genuinely see complaints as clear messages from your service users that point out where, and often why, the standard they expect has not been delivered. This gives the opportunity to precisely target improvements and enhancements.