

Principle 1: Respectful treatment



What respect means

Our organisation will:

- treat you with courtesy and respect
- be responsive
- ensure you experience no detriment for making a complaint
- require staff to treat you with courtesy and respect in our complaints policy, and
- train our frontline staff and complaint handlers in customer service, managing complex complaints and managing complaints from people in distress, who require additional support or have diverse needs.

Respecting people means showing them that their competence, feelings, opinions and rights have value and will be taken seriously. Respect is primarily shown through giving attention, appropriate tone of voice, choice of words and body language.

Why respect matters

Showing respect can help de-escalate already heightened feelings complainants may be experiencing as a result of their dissatisfaction that led to the complaint. Treating complainants as individuals who have dignity and deserve respect can restore trust in your organisation and prevent unnecessary escalation of complaints.



How to show respect

Treating a complainant with respect is equally important at first contact, throughout the process, and when finalising the complaint.



Give your full attention by making time and allowing space for the complainant to express negative feelings.



Show active and reflective listening by not interrupting or commenting too early, other than to ask clarifying questions, not talking over the other person and not allowing distractions. When someone is listening actively, they will:

- reflect their understanding by paraphrasing key content and asking whether they understood the complainant's concerns correctly
- if talking over the telephone, make affirmative sounds, and
- if meeting in person or via video call, using appropriate body language, such as nodding their head.



Make time to build rapport by allowing the person to speak first and for you to listen. If you immediately challenge the complainant's version of events, they are less likely to accept your perspective.

- Building rapport with the complainant develops trust and encourages open dialogue about their complaint, and any concerns or fears they may have. While this may seem to be time consuming, it may prevent matters from unnecessarily escalating at a later stage.



Accommodate where you can by offering choices and seeking feedback when planning for future communication or contact. Be flexible about the time of day for phone calls, location of meetings and sending of hard copy correspondence or emails.

- Ask all complainants if they need any particular assistance or have specific requirements for communication, a support person or the physical environment (if meeting face-to-face) – and ensure that these requirements are considered and provided, where possible.



Acknowledge and validate feelings by expressing empathy and understanding. If a person does not feel they have been heard or understood, they will be less likely to listen to your advice. You may feel confronted by strong emotions, such as anger and disappointment, expressed by complainants. These emotions are normal when things do not go as expected.

- Acknowledging the complainant's feelings does not mean that you agree with their assessment of the situation that led to the complaint. Even if the complainant's interpretation of the situation may be factually incorrect, their feelings are real and deserve to be treated as such.
- You can acknowledge a person's situation, feelings or point of view by saying something like:
 - 'I can absolutely see why you are concerned/feel that way. I really appreciate you bringing this issue up with me. I know that's not easy.'
- Before you tell the person what they could do next or give them your perspective, ask for permission to do so. After acknowledging their feelings, you can say:
 - 'Can I tell you what I would need to do next to find out what happened in this case?'
- If you are having trouble acknowledging someone's feelings, be curious and ask them clarifying questions, such as:
 - 'What about [the issue] do you feel was unfair?'
 - 'Then what did [staff member] say to you?'



Use inclusive language to help people feel valued and appreciated, not judged. If you find the complainant's behaviour challenging, label the behaviour, not the person. When explaining that you have reached a different conclusion to the complainant, avoid using authoritative language or tone and explain the limitations that impacted your decision. Examples of inclusive language are saying:

- 'I' and 'we', rather than 'you'
- 'my organisation/agency'
- 'and' instead of 'but' – 'I understand you said [x] happened and I can see how you could conclude that from the information that was available to you. What I found ...'
- 'there was limited available information, so we had no power to make further enquiries.'



Demonstrate fairness by being impartial, managing expectations, upholding confidentiality and, where appropriate, apologise.

- Remain unbiased when dealing with the complainant by assessing the relevant facts, providing equal treatment by consulting with both sides involved to verify information and establish common ground. This is important when the outcome is unfavourable to the complainant.
- Give the complainant clear information about the complaint management process and keep them updated on expected timeframes. This will assist in managing expectations. Explain that the process will be fair, even if they are not completely satisfied with the outcome.
- When you communicate an unfavourable outcome to the complainant, they may express strong emotions. You can show respect by communicating with them privately and confidentially (where possible and appropriate) and explaining the reasons for the outcome.
- If you or your organisation were found to be at fault as an outcome of a complaint management process, apologise and work with the complainant to resolve the issue.



Case example

Complaint

Melissa applied online to her local council for planning permission to build a garage. This was approved and confirmed verbally. However, she never received any paperwork to confirm the application was successful. She emailed her local council several times to request the outcome paperwork but did not receive a response. Melissa was nervous about calling to make a complaint in case this affected the status of her application.

Melissa called the council helpline and was connected with Briony who introduced herself. Briony reassured Melissa that her complaint would not affect her application. In fact, her complaint was welcomed by council so they could improve the service provided to others.

Briony spoke in a calm tone, asked questions and listened to Melissa's responses, making reassuring sounds. Briony explained the steps required to determine why confirmation paperwork wasn't sent, gave a realistic assessment of timelines, promised to keep her informed of the progress and provided her contact details should Melissa have any further queries. She also resolved to determine why the process failed in this instance.

Analysis

Briony behaved in line with her organisation's complaints policy by treating Melissa with courtesy, respect and fairness. She introduced herself, explained she would deal with the case and was impartial. She then asked questions to define the issues of concern to Melissa and possible resolutions. She behaved responsively and reassured Melissa that making a complaint would not negatively impact her application.

Additional resources

- NSW Ombudsman, [Effective Complaint Management Guidelines](#), 2024
- NSW Ombudsman, [6 Principles for Effective Complaint Management Information Sheet 2. Information and accessibility](#), 2024
- NSW Ombudsman, [6 Principles for Effective Complaint Management Information Sheet 3. Communication](#), 2024
- NSW Ombudsman, [6 Principles for Effective Complaint Management Information Sheet 4. Taking ownership](#), 2024
- NSW Ombudsman, [6 Principles for Effective Complaint Management Information Sheet 5. Timeliness](#), 2024
- NSW Ombudsman, [6 Principles for Effective Complaint Management Information Sheet 6. Transparency](#), 2024
- Standards Australia, [Guidelines for Complaint Management in Organizations \(AS 10002:2022\)](#), 2022
- NSW Government, [Taking Action to Help Customers in Distress: A Best Practice Guide for NSW Government](#), February 2023
- NSW Government, [Customer Commitments](#), Customer Commitments- State of the Customer | NSW Government

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National Relay Service 133 677

Telephone Interpreter Service (TIS)
131 450

We can arrange an interpreter through TIS or you can contact TIS yourself before speaking to us.