

Principle 3: Communication



What good communication means

Our organisation will:

- acknowledge the receipt of your complaint and provide you with a contact person for enquiries
- use the most appropriate channel to communicate with you
- explain how the complaint process works, including the likely next steps and time frames
- update you at regular intervals about the progress of your complaint
- tell you the outcome of your complaint, including details of the actions taken, the reasons for the decision and any remedy or resolution put in place
- explain and apologise when things go wrong, and
- inform you of internal and external avenues for review, where available.

Effective communication isn't only about the content of your message. It's also about how it is conveyed and received. A warm tone and open attitude lets the complainant know their complaint is welcome.

Why good communication matters

Communicating well helps build a positive relationship between your organisation and people who may have concerns about your services or programs. Providing complainants with timely updates and clear explanations can increase their engagement and reduce any frustrations with the complaint process. Communicating unambiguously and respectfully about what can reasonably be achieved helps avoid complainant dissatisfaction arising from unmet expectations.

How to communicate well during the complaint process

Communicate regularly with complainants throughout the complaints process, and particularly at key milestones.



Receiving the complaint

- A person may have a complaint even if they don't explicitly say so – look out for expressions of dissatisfaction like – I don't like, I'm unhappy about, I disagree or I don't think it's fair.
- Be responsive to complainants by asking them what they need:
 - How would you like to be contacted?
 - What is the best time of day to contact you?
 - Is there anything you need to make the complaint process easier for you?
 - Do you have any concerns or worries about making this complaint?
- Notice if the complainant is distressed. Show empathy and acknowledge their emotions:
 - I can see how upsetting this is for you.
 - Is there someone you can contact to support you?
- Clarify and document the reasons for the complainant's dissatisfaction – read it back to the complainant to check for accuracy.
- Ask the complainant what they want to achieve by making a complaint – discuss any unrealistic expectations.
- Provide clear information about privacy and confidentiality.
- If the complaint is made on behalf of another person, ask for consent and whether the impacted person would like to be directly updated about the progress of their complaint?



Acknowledging the complaint

- Acknowledge the receipt of the complaint promptly – ideally within 3 business days.
- Use the complainant's preferred method of communication.
- The acknowledgement should:
 - explain the next steps in the complaint process
 - set out the expected time frame to finalise the complaint
 - summarise the responsibilities/expectations of both parties, and
 - include your contact details and the complaint identification number.



Managing the complaint

- Be upfront about what you can and cannot do. Outline the possible outcomes and don't make promises you cannot keep.
- Provide realistic time frames for dealing with the complaint, and let the complainant know if delays are anticipated.
- Provide updates about the status of the complaint upon request, and at regular intervals.
- You may become aware of additional information relevant to the complaint, but unknown to the complainant. It's important that the complainant has an opportunity to question the reliability or relevance of this extra information. Share the information with the complainant, check they understand why you may need to consider it and ask if they would like to add anything.



Finalising the complaint

- Contact the complainant about the outcome, actions and reasons for the decision.
- Advise the complainant of any steps taken to prevent a repeat of the situation.
- Acknowledge when things go wrong and accept responsibility for your actions.¹ A prompt and sincere apology from an appropriate person may avoid the escalation of a dispute.
- Recognise that the result may not be what the complainant was hoping for and advise them of available options for redress or review.



1. This is protected from civil liability under s 69 of the *Civil Liability Act 2002* <http://classic.austlii.edu.au/au/legis/nsw/consol_act/cla2002161/s69.html>.



Case example

Complaint

Tran is dealing with an irate email from Mike who cannot understand why it has taken over 4 months for the organisation to respond to his complaint. Mike specifies he prefers to be contacted via email.

Tran responds by email and apologises to Mike for the time it has taken to address his complaint. She tells Mike that she is now responsible for dealing with his complaint, notes that he prefers email as a communication channel and also offers to talk to him on the telephone or face-to-face.

Tran explains the process required to finalise Mike's concerns and provides a realistic timeframe. She sends Mike regular email updates about the progress and once the complaint is finalised, she communicates the outcome to Mike via email and provides reasons.

Analysis

Effective communication is about the content of your message, and how it is conveyed and received. Tran showed good communication skills by acknowledging Mike's concerns and using email for communicating with him, Mike's preferred communication channel.

She also apologised. Apologising strengthens the authority of your organisation as it conveys openness, transparency and a willingness to admit when things have gone wrong.

By explaining the complaint process, providing regular updates and apologising, Tran alleviated some of Mike's feelings of frustration, preventing further escalation of his complaint.

Additional resources

- NSW Ombudsman, [Effective Complaint Management Guidelines, 2024](#)
- NSW Ombudsman, [6 Principles for Effective Complaint Management Information Sheet 1. Respectful treatment, 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 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](#)
- NSW Ombudsman, [Apologies – A Practical Guide, 2nd edn, March 2022, Apologies – A Practical Guide](#)
- Standards Australia, [Guidelines for Complaint Management in Organizations \(AS 10002:2022\), 2022](#)
- NSW Government, [‘Customer Commitment’, 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.