

Complaints management review – Case study

A few months ago, we were asked to review the complete process for a North Western UK Housing Association.

They were preparing for an Audit visit and realised all was not as it should be.

It soon came to light that they were right to be concerned as they revealed that they had **17 complaints** recorded in the year!

Clearly with over 6000 residents to serve 17 could only relate to high level formal ones, surely only a fraction of reality.

We reviewed the way the formal ones were handled, and it was clear that a defensive attitude was apparent and this exaggerated the gravity of the complaint as it escalated up the three internal places available.

One of the key principles of complaints management is that a complaint is to be welcomed and just like any other business challenge is managed professionally and to the satisfaction of the customer.

The main concern, which emerged, was the potentially huge number of **informal complaints**, which were not recognised or recorded.

These complaints if known would be likely to point the way to and stimulate business improvements, so it was vital we got a handle on them. Crucial that we started to understand the likely topics and volumes involved.

One key principle drove the project and revolved around the definition of a complaint.

The definition of a complaint according to British Standard 8600-1999 is:

“An expression of dissatisfaction, whether justified or not”

A clear guide, which meant that all customer contact could be classified into three main categories. We checked this out with staff focus groups and all agreed that they could easily be understood as:

- **Enquiries:** e.g. " Could I pay my rent over the phone", " Is the office open on a Saturday"
- **Requests:** "Could you arrange to collect the parcel", "Could a plumber come and mend the tap"
- **EOD's** (Expressions of dissatisfaction): "The plumber never arrived"! "He left a mess on the floor"!

Once we had the menu, it was a matter of sample "topic recording"

All staff across the organisation recorded all the topics or causes of customer contact over a period, which gave a qualitative result of EOD presence.

The organisation not only began to see their true complaint volumes, (these amounted to several thousand) and crucially began to **understand the reasons!**

Task groups were set up to tackle the causes. Work to address the issues was initiated designed to improve service standards and also potentially reduce costs, as customers would no longer have the need to contact the organisation to raise their EOD in such volumes!

Future developments included the routine capture of EOD's, which appeared on Management reports and put customer issues and concerns at the heart of the business.

Other areas effected during the review:

- The procedures published were changed by simplifying and de formalising
- Letter styles were changed to be more consistent, and less formal and defensive
- Staff were all briefed regarding the "new world" and their part in implementing the new procedures
- Service deliverers took responsibility for driving the change indicated by the "customer voice"
- Ownership of the complaints process was taken at the top of the business
- Compensation strategies were reviewed and changed

The review was a huge success and the organisation moved forward with confidence, resulting in a positive report from the Audit team.

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