

Chapter 2

Relationship between a complaints management system and quality human service

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Often, people with a disability and their families have not had high expectations of services. Indeed, service users sometimes believed that they should be grateful for the services they did receive.

A customer focused organisation understands the expectations of the service user and knows that the extent to which those expectations are being met is essential to improving the quality of service. When service user expectations exceed what the organisation is able to or can afford to deliver, either the service level has to increase or the expectations of the service user have to be better managed. You may need to review promotional material, website content, staff training etc to determine why the expectations are higher than service delivery.



A complaints management system is an organised way of responding to, recording, reporting and using complaints to improve the service to people with a disability. It includes procedures for people to make complaints and guidelines for staff to resolve complaints.

An effective complaints management system will:

- create a second chance to provide service (service recovery³)
- identify areas for improvement
- provide opportunities to strengthen public support for your organisation, and
- assist in the planning and allocation of resources.

An effective complaints management system has two key components. First, the specific complaint must be resolved in a way which is respectful, responsive and accountable. Second, data must be captured to provide feedback about the system and processes. Often complaints are an early warning of an issue that may also be of concern to a number of other service users.



Tip

There is no point having a complaints management system if staff (or service users) are not aware of how it works nor had any input into its development.

(Queensland Ombudsman, 2008)



The bus story

Several families had concerns about a bus driver who collected their sons and daughters for a day program. One of them raised this concern with the disability provider but nothing was done. A few months later the bus was involved in an accident and it subsequently emerged that the driver had had his licence suspended for dangerous driving some months beforehand.

This is an example where one complaint can not only reflect the concerns of others but also be an early warning signal of more significant problems. As will be discussed later, only a small percentage of those dissatisfied with a service make a complaint. Consequently complaints should be seen as being the tip of the iceberg. In this way complaint data can help to determine service deficiencies that may require corrective action, as well as service strengths that may require further support. Complaints often have a 'root cause', not just a 'tipping point'. Root causes could include: recruitment processes, organisational communication, staff training, policies, processes, guidelines etc. Tipping points are usually the 'straw that broke the camel's

³ Service recovery allows you to be judged on your ability to deal with the complaint effectively and make the experience positive for the complainant. "88% of people whose complaints are well handled will repurchase" Society of Consumer Affairs Professionals, Complaints Culture Survey, 2005.

back'. The issue that caused the person to make the complaint may be the result of a build up of dissatisfaction with your organisation.

It is no longer sufficient to determine if the complaint is justified or not from the organisation's point of view as it is almost certainly justified in the view of the person making the complaint. Given the reluctance many people feel towards complaining there is also a need to make them feel comfortable raising their concerns. You can also use the complaint process to follow up with complainants on how they found your complaints process separate from the actual outcome. One way of approaching this is to ask complainants what worked and what did not work for them about the complaints process. This can provide helpful information to improve your complaints system. It is also important to ask those who have not made a complaint these questions, as they may have different issues with the process.

Complaints management is just one way of obtaining feedback from service users. Service user satisfaction can be measured via a range of other methods, including surveys, suggestion boxes or focus groups, as well as informal events where users of a service have the chance to mix with staff of the service so they can raise issues they might not otherwise raise through more formal complaints processes. In selecting approaches for obtaining feedback from service users you may need to consider the appropriateness of the method for some people with a cognitive disability.

A thematic analysis of person centred plans in your organisation may serve to highlight trends in the types of assistance and support service users are seeking from your organisation. This may serve to identify areas in need of improvement for your service.

Satisfaction surveys can be an effective means of gathering useful data to identify areas of service strength and potential improvement (Huson, 2008). A disadvantage with some satisfaction surveys is that they can be lengthy, reducing the return rate and adding to the analysis costs. They also do not always provide targeted information for the organisation on how it can improve.



Another methodology called the netPromoter Score (NPS) seeks to determine behaviours rather than attitudes, and specifically draws out information based on whether service users are likely to talk positively to others about your organisation, who won't, and why. This approach groups consumers into broadly three categories. There are those who are loyal customers, who keep receiving service from the organisation and actively promote it to others. Then there are the passives, who are satisfied but unenthusiastic and would easily change services. Finally there are the detractors, who are unhappy customers trapped in a bad relationship. The key questions posed are:

- Rate from 0 (Not at all likely) to 10 (Extremely likely) whether you would recommend the organisation to someone you know.
- What is the primary reason for the score provided?
- What is the most important improvement we could make to improve your score?

Then by subtracting the detractors (those who scored 0–6) from the promoters (those who scored 9–10) an NPS% can be formulated (Reichheld, 2006).



Thought

In promoting choice it can be helpful to have a decision making agreement which outlines how the person communicates and this information is then shared with others.



Tip

- Inform people where to complain
- Avoid long complicated forms that discourage complaints
- Use forms that clearly indicate to a complainant what they need to tell you when lodging a complaint
- Be responsive – acknowledge complaints quickly, establish target times for stages of the complaint process and let your customers know what to expect
- Find out what the person wants you to do about the problem and be clear about the remedies you can offer and do not make promises you cannot keep
- Give personal and specific replies – a stock standard reply that doesn't address their issues, may make things worse
- Treat people as you would like to be treated – do not pass the buck – but if you need to refer the complaint to someone else or further review is available internally or externally make sure you give the complainant full details
- Let complainants know about any improvements that have been made as a result of their complaints and thank them for their feedback.

Queensland Ombudsman, 2008
(Communication fact sheet 3)

