

Effective Complaints Management

11: Business Improvement

INFORMATION FOR NORTHERN TERRITORY PUBLIC SECTOR AGENCIES:

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This Fact Sheet forms part of a series designed to assist public sector agencies to ensure they have appropriate procedures in place to effectively manage customer complaints.

The Fact Sheet series has been kindly made available by the Queensland Ombudsman. It has been adapted for use in the Northern Territory.

For further information or advice, please contact the Northern Territory Ombudsman's Office on 08 8999 1818.

Ways to improve business

Effective complaints management systems that collect specific data and identify recurring or system-wide problems deliver key information to improve business processes.

Consultation about your complaints management processes will also help you to identify imaginative ways of using your resources to better serve your customers. (For detailed information on reviewing your system, see Fact Sheet 12, *Reviewing Internal Systems*).

Data collection

The key to gaining business improvement from your complaints management system lies in having a systematic approach to recording complaints and their outcomes, particularly whole-of-agency data, in sufficient detail to allow analysis.

The amount of information that can be collected from complaints is considerable. The client complaints form is a key business improvement tool, recording important details for analysis of trends over time. For further advice on the role and types of data collection in the complaints process, see Fact Sheet 7, *Resources*.

Complaints recording

How you approach the task of collecting complaints information will depend upon the business of your organisation.

Your complaints form needs to be user-friendly for customers and staff. Check boxes work best when people are busy or when recording common complaints.

The sample complaints forms attached to this Fact Sheet illustrate the type of information needed to resolve complaints and evaluate and improve client services.

Centralised and systematic recording of complaints information and outcomes is particularly important if your agency has a Territory-wide presence and regional offices handle complaints.

Information technology offers great advantages, particularly in making it quicker and easier to find and analyse information.

A complaints recording facility could be added to existing information management systems or a program specific to complaints may need to be introduced.

However, a well-maintained paper system can also work effectively for agencies with low volumes of complaints. The most important issue is to record complaints accurately and in sufficient detail for analysis. Systems should:

- have an agency-specific schema to categorise complaints issues (relating to business processes for consistency of recording and reporting)
- record and monitor complaints
- provide appropriate responses (be cautious with using standard responses or general paragraphs)
- channel information to those who can prevent recurring problems
- provide material for analysis
- produce reports to management
- record the organisation's learnings as a source of information for continuous improvement
- measure customer satisfaction.

Useful tip

Learn and improve as a result of complaints to increase the effectiveness of your organisation.

EFFECTIVE COMPLAINTS MANAGEMENT – BUSINESS IMPROVEMENT

Independent review of complaints management

A number of NT public sector agencies have established independent review mechanisms for complaints, either because it is a statutory requirement or as a means to ensure an open and accountable complaints system. However to the best of our knowledge no NT public sector agency has yet established a mechanism to provide for an independent review of its actual complaints management system.

In Queensland an organisation has taken this step. Disability Services Queensland (DSQ) has established a Complaints Management Quality Committee to monitor its complaints management system. The Minister appoints this independent committee, made up of two representatives who have a disability or advocates for people with a disability, two members whose expertise deal with investigations and resolution of complaints, and one representative who is a disability service provider. The committee meets quarterly.

The committee is responsible for:

- ensuring an independent review of complaints handling on a range of individual complaints
- advising on the extent to which complaints are used in continuous improvement processes
- advising on trends in complaints
- recommending priority areas for attention
- recommending changes to policies and procedures.

The committee is charged with reporting to the Minister quarterly and to provide an annual report on the quality, efficiency and effectiveness of DSQ's complaints management system, and to advise the Minister of serious policy or practice complaints as they occur.

Systemic and recurring complaints

When complaints information is classified and analysed, systemic and recurring problems will be more easily identified and rectified before they reach crisis point. This can help you to proactively target problem areas and monitor performance.

Complaints trend analysis and reports for policy makers and management should:

- set out complaint numbers and different complaint types with subcategories (the structure can be modified through experience over time)
- measure achievement against agency standards
- provide comparisons with previous periods
- allow modification of operational standards to ensure they are realistic and achievable
- include analysis of the main complaints areas to explain basic figures and highlight significant areas
- provide information for review of policy and practices and suggest where business improvements are warranted (see Fact Sheet 12, *Reviewing Internal Systems*).

A collaborative approach

There may be a common thread that links other organisations with your agency. It could be that your agency's responsibilities cross over with others or another agency may deliver some of your customer services. Perhaps a number of agencies have similar multicultural programs and a joint approach may be beneficial for all parties and the community.

Collaborative arrangements can result in many business benefits, such as improved services and shared costs. When developing formal or informal partnership agreements, build in arrangements to manage complaints and gain customer feedback to improve business performance.

You may need to develop a stand-alone system to manage complaints arising from the shared initiative, particularly if the parties to the agreement have diverse complaints management models.

However, with careful planning at the outset, it is possible to set up database links, common complaint categories and standardised reporting on complaints. This will make the complaints management system compatible with your agency's business improvement policies.

Useful tip

The trend to public participation in government decision-making suggests that strengthening relations with your customers by investing in effective complaints management systems would be a sound investment. Information from your community engagement activities could be combined with complaints information to improve your future business activities.

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