

Good **Complaint** **Resolution** = Good **Government**

Andy Barton



demand to speak to the mayor.”

You’ve heard this one before: an angry citizen demanding to speak to an elected official or to the organization’s chief administrative officer. The nature of the complaint also will likely be familiar: the citizen is dissatisfied with the jurisdiction’s policies or services and has concerns ranging anywhere from capital budgeting to animal control. The complainant is extremely upset and demands immediate remediation.

A challenge for local government is to deal effectively with this potentially negative situation and, if possible, to learn from it. Effective complaint resolution requires that:

- The true nature of the complaint is understood.
- The problem is resolved quickly, or if resolution is not possible, the organization’s rationale for being unable to comply with the request is explained thoroughly and respectfully.
- The complainant is informed about the opportunities for involvement in the decision-making and policy-making processes in the future.

**One
Solution:
Appoint an
Ombudsman**

Effective complaint resolution is one of the most important functions of local government. As governments strive to become better organizations by placing a greater emphasis on customer service, the ability to deal effectively with complaints (or other service-related feedback) becomes paramount. Organizations that place a high value on providing good-quality services but are relatively inattentive when it comes to complaints may unintentionally undermine the service ethic they espouse.

With these points in mind, the intent of this article is twofold: (1) to offer some easy and practical suggestions for resolving citizen complaints, and (2) to explain how designating an organizational ombudsman as a focal point for resolving disputes can work to advantage.

Key Steps in Complaint Resolution

When responding to complaints, remember that the manner in which an organization deals with citizen complaints helps to define that organization. If it is highly committed to customer service, an organization will respond readily to individuals or groups within its service population who are upset with some facet of service delivery or organizational policy. The interaction with the complainant is critical because negative word-of-mouth can quickly erode an organization's credibility.

Organizations that are most successful in serving their citizens listen closely to those who are dissatisfied, correct mistakes, and adopt constructive ideas and suggestions quickly. This process usually amounts to nothing more than spending a few extra minutes with a complainant to ensure that he or she gets an appropriate answer, action, or explanation.

While there is no magic formula for dealing with upset people, here are a few steps that may help to produce a good atmosphere for successful interaction with angry citizens.

Kirkland, Washington, has incorporated ombudsman complaint resolution responsibilities into an existing position.

Take the time to listen. While this advice sounds obvious, it is important to allow complainants sufficient time to explain their problems. Often, by the time a complaint arrives at the level of an elected official or the chief administrative officer, a complex history is associated with the issue that takes time to be explained. It is important that the organization's representative listens closely to what is being said. Most complainants are perfectly civil, but others may want to "vent." Simply listening to all complainants while showing courtesy and respect may help to change their perceptions of the organization.

If possible, find a private or quiet meeting space in which to listen, as doing so may help to put the complainant more at ease, particularly if the complaint is of a personal nature or involves the organization's staff members or elected officials.

Don't be defensive. Complainants may, in the course of explaining their problems, speak disparagingly of the organization. While verbal abuse need not be tolerated, a defensive posture on the part of the listener is usually inappropriate and often counterproductive. Instead of responding directly to accusations, the listener should keep the discussion to the point by asking specific questions, such as: To whom did the complainant first speak? When? What transpired? How did things go awry?

"Just the facts." To help complainants, it is necessary to understand any complaint history that they may have with the organization. Have they tried to obtain resolution through normal channels, or have they instead decided to go straight to the top? Is the problem the result of existing organizational policy or the consequence of a specific departmental action? Does the problem stem from interaction with departmental employees, or is it beyond the control of the jurisdiction? Taking the time for basic detective work at this juncture will save steps in the long run.

Determine the desired outcome. What do complainants really want? What specific actions do they seek? Because this may not be evident as a story unfolds, it may be useful to ask this question directly. In addition to providing information necessary to resolve problems, this question can also pinpoint a possible problem area within the organization.

Act quickly. Despite the fact that the problem may have been brewing for weeks or longer, it is important that the organization act quickly. Regardless of who is at fault, in the complainant's view the organization's credibility already is in question. The fires of discontent only will be fueled by shelving the problem or by insisting that the complainant work the problem out through normal channels.

If others within the organization are brought in to resolve the problem, make certain that the complainant has been connected with the appropriate persons and that follow-up is done to ensure that the questions were answered.

Encourage meetings. For particularly complex problems, such as those that may span several departments within the organization, it may be useful to arrange a meeting at which the complainant can meet directly with the appropriate staff persons. Even if the complainant cannot get precisely what he or she desires, there may be room for an



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acceptable compromise or, at the very least, a chance for a more comprehensive explanation of the reason why the complainant's request was denied.

In-person meetings tend to put a more user-friendly face on interactions with government. Citizens feel better about government when they have easy access to those who make and carry out policy. An organization that is serious about its commitment to providing high-quality service to its public will take the extra time to meet and work with its customers, even its most demanding ones.

Provide alternatives, and encourage participation in the decision-making process. Public decision making always is improved by a well-informed and politically active electorate, and you can never go wrong by stimulating interest in this process. Providing a complainant with alternatives ensures that the person will not come away from his or her interaction with government empty-handed. Even though a "no" answer to a service request is frustrating, people can tolerate a denial more easily if they are aware of other alternatives. The complainant should be informed of who the elected policymakers are and how he or she might get in touch with them.

An explanation of how the system of government works and how the organization makes policy also can be useful. Many complainants may benefit from knowing various public hearing dates, as well as dates and times of pertinent advisory board and commission meetings. Additionally, an explanation of the organization's policies regarding answering written correspondence and addressing elected officials at public meetings may be helpful to the complainant. Letting the citizen know how to file requests for code variances or hearing-examiner appeals also is valuable in encouraging participation in the decision-making process.

Follow up. It is extremely important to ensure that all of the questions raised

by the complainant have been addressed thoroughly and in a timely manner. If it is necessary to refer the complainant to another department, the appropriate departmental staff member should be contacted and asked to provide a brief status report on the disposition of the complaint.

A follow-up phone call to the complainant also is of value. There are two major benefits to following up: (1) it is another mechanism for identifying and correcting organizational trouble spots, and (2) it demonstrates that the organization is genuinely interested in providing thorough, good-quality service.

Go with experience. Complaint resolution efforts will generate the best results when handled by the most experienced staff members because these are generally the ones who possess the greatest knowledge of how the organization functions and what its policies are. It stands to reason that those with the most experience can resolve problems more efficiently than those with less organizational tenure. Seasoned workers, particularly those in line service jobs, also are less likely to get flustered when dealing with upset complainants.

Finally, experienced employees usually have well-established intraorganizational relationships that allow them to obtain information or resolve problems more easily, and without being seen as a threat or a nuisance by departmental staff.

Track the effectiveness of complaint resolution procedures. The implementation of a complaint tracking log will provide valuable information for organizational growth and development. Because the ability of an organization to progress is closely linked to its ability to measure, a complaint tracking log can help to identify and correct service problems. Strong efforts in this regard will improve the relationship between those who work in the public sector and those whose tax dollars support it.

One Solution: Appoint an Ombudsman

Citizens can be intimidated by governmental structures and may not know how to go about gaining access to basic governmental services. Organizations interested in effective complaint resolution, and in the use of information from complaints as a means of improving services and programs, should consider appointing an ombudsman who can serve as the focal point for problem resolution.

A number of larger cities and counties have appointed full-time ombudsmen to deal with complaint resolution issues. While this approach often is effective, it may not be a practical option in smaller organizations with insufficient funds or staffing depth to commit either a full- or a part-time position to these duties. A viable alternative used to advantage by Kirkland, Washington (population 43,000, with 320 full-time employees), has been to incorporate ombudsman complaint-resolution responsibilities into an existing position. In Kirkland's case, this position is that of the assistant to the city manager, who also serves as the city's public information officer.

Kirkland's program is advertised through brochures, the city's government-access television channel, and periodically in the city's newsletter, which is mailed directly to all residences and businesses so that citizens will know whom to contact with specific problems. In publicizing the program, Kirkland is careful to explain that the ombudsman should only be contacted when efforts to resolve an issue within a city department have failed.

City employees also are made aware of the ombudsman's role and refer cases to the ombudsman when appropriate. Kirkland's ombudsman acts primarily as a facilitator and does not have the direct authority to overturn departmental and/or policy decisions, although the ombudsman's actions may result in a second-opinion review of the complaint during which the original determina-

tion may be modified or reversed. Most complaints, however, are resolved through a fact-finding effort with the department involved.

Average time spent by Kirkland's ombudsman in complaint resolution efforts is about five hours per week. The city's objective has been to provide its community with a complaint-resolution focal point, while keeping its staffing costs in check. This program has been up and running for more than four years and has been well received by residents, staff, and councilmembers.

In summary, managers and public servants who share a common mission—prompt and effective citizen service—can further it easily by following the outlined steps or simply by taking the time to ensure that a complainant's questions are properly addressed. Because the manner in which one deals with unhappy customers may shape the public perception of government (for better or for worse) in the years to come, the efforts spent in shaping a positive perception of the organization are minimal compared with the efforts needed to correct a negative image. Judging by Kirkland's experience, a significant commitment of organizational resources is not necessary to achieve highly positive results. **DM**

Andy Barton is assistant to the city manager and ombudsman, Kirkland, Washington.

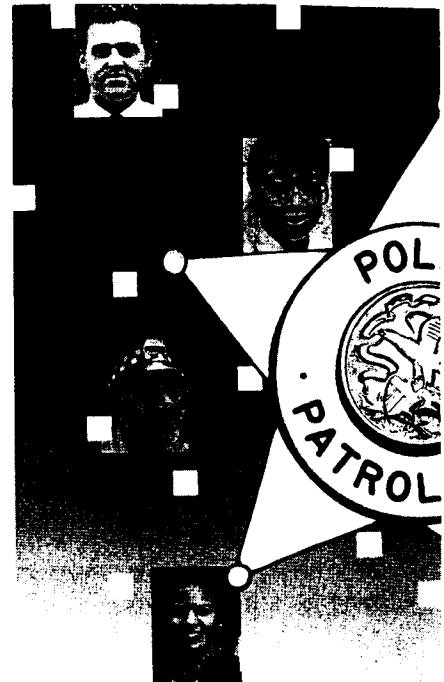
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