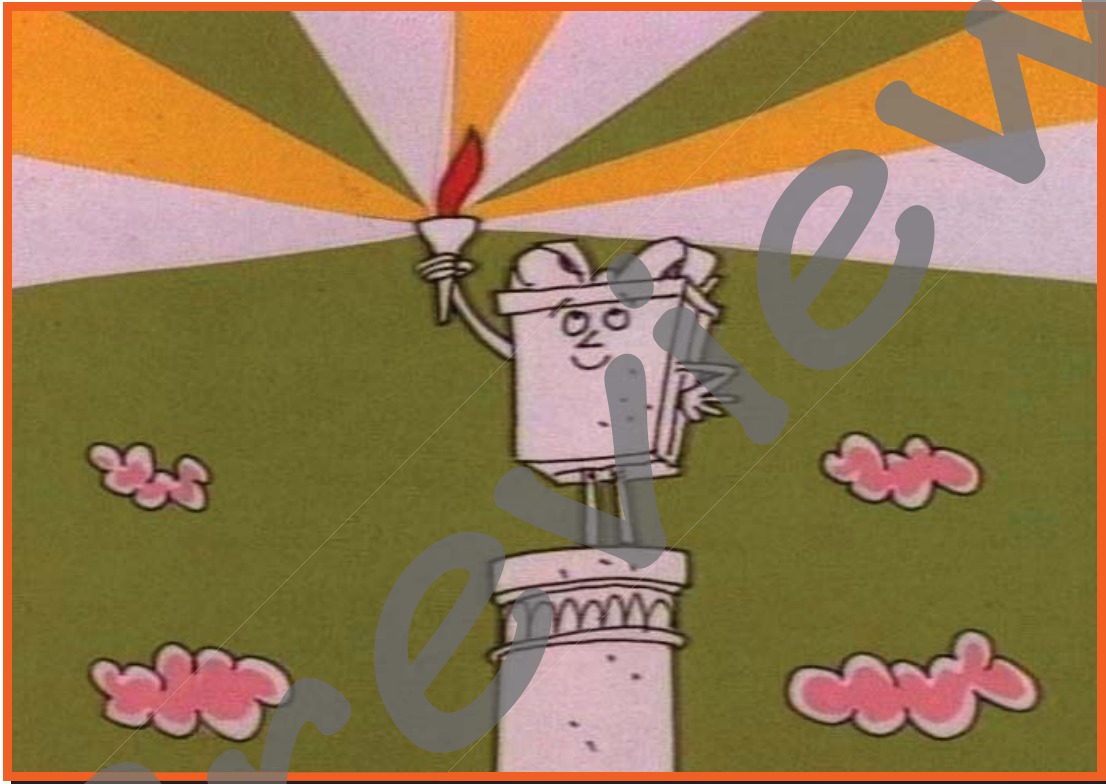


# A Complaint is a Gift

Using Customer Feedback as a Strategic Tool

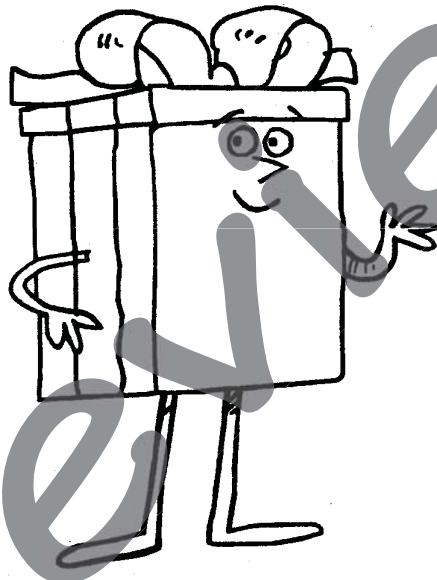


Assessing Your Organization's Complaint Friendliness

An Enterprise Media Release

Leader's Guide

# A COMPLAINT IS A GIFT



## Leader's Guide

By BARBARA "BJ" HARTLEY and JANELLE BARLOW

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# INTRODUCTION

*Customer complaints* can give businesses and organizations a wake-up call when they're not achieving their fundamental purpose — meeting customer needs. Customer complaints are the biggest bargain in market research — providing a feedback mechanism that can help organizations rapidly and inexpensively improve the quality of their service, as well as gain ideas for new products and services.

And yet most organizations think of complaints as something bad, as something to be discouraged or avoided. Some companies even have campaigns and incentives for employees to *reduce* the number of customer complaints! Reducing customer complaints may *seem* like a good idea on the surface; but when one looks at the research on actual customer behavior, it is clear that "No News Is NOT Good News!" For instance, a recent survey by TARP (Technical Research Assistance Programs) showed that 26 out of 27 unhappy customers will NOT complain — they simply take their business elsewhere! Organizations miss the chance to win back those 26 people because no one knows they're unhappy. How can we "make things right" for an unhappy customer if the customer doesn't complain?

People don't complain for many reasons — "Too much trouble; No one will listen anyway; I don't know who to complain to; People are rude to me when I make a complaint; I've complained before and nothing was done about it," etc. People also don't complain because many organizations make it difficult to do so — or mishandle complaints when they do happen!

But while unhappy customers may not complain to the organization — they will complain to other people! Customer service research indicates that while happy customers will tell eight of their friends about their good experiences — unhappy customers will tell at least twenty-two other people, both friends and strangers, about their complaints!

The bottom line is that organizations of all kinds — for-profit businesses, government agencies, non-profit organizations, and others — all lose valuable customers by not capturing information about the unhappy ones and fixing their problems before they leave! It costs five times more to win a new customer than it does to keep an existing one!

This training video and leader's guide is designed to help you and your organization transform your attitude toward complaining customers, and to see them as the valuable resource they really are. A complaint is not a problem — A COMPLAINT IS A GIFT!

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## Questions

- Make it safe for people to ask all kinds of questions, including “dumb” ones.
- Watch for puzzled looks or frowns on participants’ faces. You may have to “draw out” their questions or concerns.
- Repeat participant questions so that the whole group understands.
- Answer each question to the entire group, not just to the person who asked it.
- Ask clarifying or follow-up questions if necessary, especially if you’re not sure you understood the question asked of you.
- Don’t “fake it” in answering participant questions. If you don’t know the answer, you can respond in several ways:
  - “That’s a good question. Does anyone in the group know the answer?”
  - “That’s a tough one. I don’t know the answer to that. How could we find out?”
  - “Let’s toss that one out for the group to consider. What do you all think?”
- Always respect the self-esteem of participants — NEVER PUT DOWN THE LEARNER!

## More On Questions

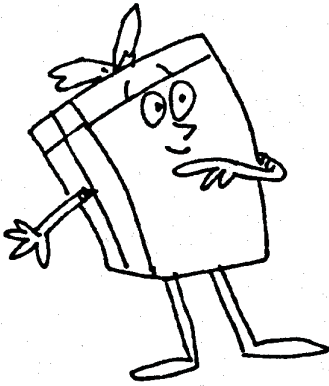
- Ask one question at a time. Don’t confuse the discussion by asking rapid-fire questions.
- Ask open-ended questions that will encourage participants share openly.
- Ask questions to stimulate creativity and new ideas, i.e., “What are all the different ways you could handle that situation? Let’s see how many options you might have to deal with it.”
- Avoid asking yes/no questions and leading questions.
- Make sure you understand a participant’s question; rephrase it if necessary to get clarity.
- Make sure participants understand your questions; rephrase in a different way if participants seem puzzled, or you get answers that miss the point. They may not have understood your question.
- Turn questions over to the group as much as possible. Gain the group’s involvement and encourage them to learn from one another.
- Be patient — not all questions will be clear. Rephrase, clarify.

## Listening

- Listening is probably THE most important skill a facilitator can use.
- Effective listening is the only way you can determine what participants know and don’t know, and what they need to learn from the seminar.
- Listen and watch for any signs of confusion. Ask what the confusion is about — don’t just ignore it.
- When asking questions, allow time for participants to respond. Allow for silence if they need a little time to reflect on your question.
- Rephrase and summarize responses for the group, so everyone “gets it.”
- Allow pauses for important points or key insights to sink in.
- Reinforce participants’ involvement with verbal and non-verbal cues. Nod your head in affirmation; lean forward with interest; smile; pay active attention; use comments such as “Go on,” “You’re on the right track,” “Tell us more about that . . .” and so on.

# **“A COMPLAINT IS A GIFT”**

## **STORY SYNOPSIS**



The hero in our story is a little character named “Complaint,” who lives in the “Land of Business as Usual.” Complaint has a difficult life, since no one treats him very well. They ignore him, or hide from him, or pass him along to someone else. They make him stand in long lines, or they interrogate him — he can’t get anyone to listen to him or help him. Finally, Complaint can’t stand it anymore, and he leaves the Land of Business as Usual, in search of a place where people will treat him right.

He first visits the “Land of Catchy Slogans,” a festive, colorful place where everybody says all the right things: “You’re number 1 with us!” “The customer is always right!” etc. But he soon finds that their slogans are empty, and they don’t mean what they say. Disappointed, he leaves, still in search of a place that knows how to treat Complaints.

He next goes to the “Land of Big Promises,” feeling optimistic that a place that keeps its promises would be hospitable to him. He is impressed with the grandeur of the place, and he receives assurances that “Yes, indeed, we honor all our promises.” But alas, Complaint failed to read the fine print at the bottom of the contract, and he is once again disappointed. Will he ever find the place he is looking for?

He trudges off to the “Land of Lofty Vision,” a place that certainly sounds like they know what they’re doing. It sounds inspiring, and his spirits lift as he approaches this Land. But when he tries to get people’s attention, he discovers that they are all so busy planning the future, that they pay no attention to what’s going on today. Complaint needs them right now, and all they do is “shush” him. He leaves this land, feeling discouraged and despairing that he will never find a place that treats him right.

The last place on his journey is the “Land of Complaints,” a place that sounds terrible to him. He approaches it with dread, thinking it will be full of lots of unhappy Complaints, just like himself. But when he gets there, it doesn’t look at all like he expected — it’s bright, colorful, and efficient. All the people are very helpful, and they immediately welcome him. They thank him for coming and apologize for the frustrating time he’s had. They listen attentively to him, so they can find out what will solve his problem. Everyone treats him so well that he is surprised and overwhelmed. They explain to him that they value him, because they learn from him — he gives them an opportunity to improve their products and services. And sometimes, when they listen to him, they get ideas of new products and services. They truly appreciate how important he is, and they want him to always feel welcome. Complaint knows that he has found his new home at last. For in the Land of Complaints, everyone knows that a Complaint is really a Gift!



# *A Complaint Is A Gift*

## **Four-hour Seminar for Front-line Employees**

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### **I. Introductions, Expectations, Overview (15 minutes)**

Welcome participants to the session and explain why the seminar is being held. If appropriate, have participants introduce themselves, giving name, department, and any other pertinent information.

Ask the group what they'd like to get out of the session and list these issues on a flip chart. Thank the group for giving you their areas of interest — tape the list to the wall so you can refer back to it during the seminar.

Briefly go over the agenda of topics to be covered in the seminar, pointing out how the seminar should cover all the issues on the list they gave you. Be prepared at the end of the seminar to go back over this list, making sure that participants' issues and concerns were covered.

Discuss how you plan to work together with the group. Emphasize that this session is for **THEM**, to help them in their jobs. They should view you as a *resource*, a facilitator to help them learn how to handle customer complaints effectively. Let them know that there will be lots of participation and group discussion. Not only will they learn from you — they'll learn from each other. Encourage questions, comments, and interruptions. Tell them it's OK to disagree with one another — different people may have different ideas and opinions about the issues discussed.

Go over administrative, or "housekeeping issues" — what time the session ends, when you'll take a break, location of restrooms and phones, refreshments, etc.

### **II. How Do You Usually Respond to Complaints? (20 minutes)**

Approach one of the participants and pretend that you're a customer giving them a complaint (relevant to their job and their organization). Make this complaint sound as genuine as possible.

Then pause for a moment, and give them an opportunity to respond.

After their response, ask them what it felt like to be on the receiving end of that complaint? Did they feel defensive? Anxious? Awkward?

Explain and discuss with the group how most people tend to respond to complaints — we often view it as an attack of some kind, even when we know it's not personal. Sometimes we get tense, especially if the customer is angry, and we work hard to deflect or defuse their complaint and/or their anger.

# *A Complaint Is A Gift*

## Four-hour Seminar for Managers

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### **I. Introductions, Expectations, Overview (15 minutes)**

Welcome participants to the session and explain why the seminar is being held. If appropriate, have participants introduce themselves, giving name, department, and any other pertinent information.

Ask the group what they'd like to get out of the session and list these issues on a flip chart. Thank the group for giving you their areas of interest — tape the list to the wall so you can refer back to it during the seminar.

Briefly go over the agenda of topics to be covered in the seminar, pointing out how the seminar should cover all the issues on the list they gave you. Be prepared at the end of the seminar to go back over this list, making sure that participants' issues and concerns were covered.

Discuss how you plan to work together with the group. Emphasize that this session is for THEM, to help them in their jobs as managers. They should view you as a *resource*, a facilitator to help them learn how to handle customer complaints effectively. Let them know that there will be lots of participation and group discussion. Not only will they learn from you — they'll learn from each other. Encourage questions, comments, and interruptions. Tell them it's OK to disagree with one another — there may be differences between departments and how their managers handle complaints — and, different people may have different ideas and opinions about the issues discussed.

Go over administrative, or "housekeeping issues" — what time the session ends, when you'll take a break, location of restrooms and phones, refreshments, etc.

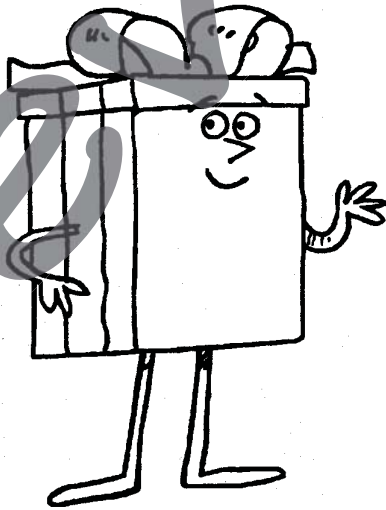
### **II. Assessing Your Organization's "Complaint-Friendly Culture" (30 minutes)**

**NOTE:** It is important that participants select a "Response Focus" for their assessment — that is, are they going to evaluate only their own department, or the entire organization? Explain this clearly to them sometime during the process of giving instructions.

Point out to participants that before they can work on improving complaint handling within their department or organization, it's essential that they have some way of evaluating how complaints are handled today.



# *Participant Handouts & Worksheets*



**What are the customer complaints we hear most often?**

*Notes*

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**What are the customer complaints we most hate to hear?**

*Notes*

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## PRACTICE EXAMPLES OF COMPLAINTS

On the phone: "The clock I ordered doesn't work."

On the phone: "I just got home and discovered that two of the glasses I purchased are broken. They must have been packed poorly."

In person: "I called your operator and she gave me the wrong instructions on how to get here. I have been walking around for two hours."

In person: "I have been waiting in this line for ten minutes. You need more people at the checkout stands."

On the phone: "I'm really upset. This is the third time I've been put on hold and made to wait for more than ten minutes. I want to talk to your general manager."

On the phone: "I just got a second bill from your company. I know I already paid this."

In person: "Your prices are too high. I don't see why I should pay so much when I know other stores have a better deal."

In person: "There's someone smoking in the nonsmoking section. You need to do something about that."

On the phone: "Your company told me that someone would be out to fix my washing machine this morning. It's already two o'clock, and no one is here yet."

On the phone: "I called your service number three times, and no one has gotten back to me. In the meantime, I can't use my computer."

In person: "Your newspaper ad shows these shirts available at a good price. But you don't have any left."

In person: "You can't find anything in this store. I have been walking all over three floors trying to locate the buttons and everyone keeps sending me to another location."

## MANAGEMENT'S ROLE IN ESTABLISHING A COMPLAINT-FRIENDLY ORGANIZATION

**What is the role of management in ensuring that complaints are handled as gifts in our organization?**

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**What are some specific things that we, as managers, can do to make our organization more complaint-friendly?**

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