



CHIEF'S FILE CABINET

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What is your Problem Buddy?

Receiving a complaint can sometimes feel like a real nuisance. If you are the person who is making a complaint, it can be an extremely frustrating experience. The essence of a complaint is something is wrong and somebody wants a remedy. Generally they want it immediately. This plays itself out in the field of fire service more often than we would like to see.

You may well have been on the receiving end of a complaint recently. You might be the person who has to deal with the frustrated customer who has filed a complaint and has been dissatisfied with the answer. So, they now arrive in your office. Handling complaints is a lot more of a skill set than people give credit for. In the first place complaints cannot be dismissed as just merely bad opinions of other parties.

Handling complaints is a specific skill set in the field of fire officer skills. There is a methodology to it just like every other component of fire prevention.

For example, there are only two ways that you can receive a complaint. Someone can either tell you about it or they can submit it in writing. Which of the two of those do you think can cause you the most grief? Surprise answer: both. If you receive a verbal complaint and don't follow-up on it, it erodes the credibility of the organization. If you receive a written complaint and are unable to follow-up on it, it can actually result in legal action. As a matter of fact, failure to respond to a complaint can be a very serious liability to any organization. So, let's both agree right now that handling complaints is something that you should be prepared to do very, very quickly.

What is the number one rule of handling a complaint? Paperwork! Make sure that the complaint has been adequately documented. No matter if it was given to you verbally or in a written fashion, the first thing you need to do is make sure that somehow or other it gets entered into the record keeping system. Many fire departments have a complaint form that they give out for people to file when they receive official grumblings. If someone actually comes to the desk and files a complaint, it is just as important that it be converted into documentation as the one that comes in writing.

The number 2 rule is never over react to a complaint when it is received. What this means is that no matter how outlandish and no matter what the person has to say, your first response should never be either overly defensive or evasive. The number one thing that you should remember in terms of complaints is that almost all of them are based on some factual circumstance. Your first task is to get all the facts before you act. Research the complaint thoroughly before you move on. That may mean looking at other documents, interviewing other parties, reading records, or for the lack of anything else, merely interviewing a number of parties to find out what actually happened.



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Make sure that you interview the complainer as thoroughly as you actually can. Ask questions. Ask for clarification of various points. Collect every piece of information you can from the complainant as early on as possible and document them while simultaneously withholding any opinions as to the validity of the complaint. If the complaint involves behavior of someone in your department that works out in the field, one of the tasks must be to go out and see if there are other witnesses to the complaint. This means you should look into the possibility that more than one person is an observer of whatever condition is being complained about. Again, it is very important that you preserve the sense of fairness by not asking people did you see: x, y z. This gives them the ability to answer with a yes or no. Instead, the approach should be: we understand an incident occurred four days ago, can you tell me what happened?

The next step is to make sure that whatever the complainant addresses, it must be based on some kind of performance requirement expectation contained within the policies and procedures of your organization. To resolve a complaint often means determining whether there was a violation of regulations, standards, policies or procedures. It is very important that you not take another person's word for what was right or wrong, but rather focus on what the system provides as the definition of expectation. This may seem like an unnecessary amount of time to look into even the simplest of complaints. The reality is that without researching a complaint you do not know if your organization is in the wrong or merely uncomfortable with an outcome. In order for a complaint to have any degree of validity, there must be a cause for you taking further action. And one of the causes might be that information was correct or incorrect with regard to what was being asked for.

Once you have completed the collection of all of your facts, the next step is to draft a response. What you need to do is to make sure that the process of drafting the compliant does not bring facts to bear that are irrelevant. You should start off by stating whatever the complaint was, identifying the facts as you can prove them and then being prepared to recommend a proposed corrective action. That can either be to support the complaint as being valid or that the complaint is in error and the department will not alter its outcomes. Believe it or not, both of these have equal authority in the context of complaint management. A complaint does not always mean somebody did something wrong, but continually getting complaints sometimes means the organization must take a closer look at itself.

Before you take action on a complaint, it is obviously in your best interest to make sure that you can stand the scrutiny of outside observation. This means that you should never use your first draft as your final document. Take time to review and edit the document to make sure all the facts can be established and that the citations that are mentioned are extremely accurate.

Obtaining a third party review of a complaint response is a prudent thing to do. It is often advisable to speak to your superior in responding to a complaint. In some cases it is just as important to speak with



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your subordinates about how you intend to handle a complaint. Both of these will provide you with ample opportunity to identify potential consequences for your ultimate decision.

How do you know that you have done a good job with a complaint? It doesn't mean that everybody is happy. What it does mean is that the issue has been resolved. If the answer that you came up with is fair and accurately represents the conditions it is more likely to be looked upon as being fair. If the complaint is about a member of your organization, it is extremely important that the person be granted due process in responding to a complainant. If it is about another action taken externally to the department, it is equally important that other parties be notified.

The last and final step is to make sure that a copy of the complaint report has been properly inventoried and put into the records management system so it can be retrieved at some point in the future.

Departments that have a comprehensive total quality management program often have a special means of processing the complaints to see how they relate to other performance outcomes.

In a well managed service system, complaints are not always a condition of failure. They are an indication of the relationship between customer and client. The more successful you are in handling complaints, the more likely you are capable of turning a complainer into an ally.