**Spark Coaching and Training**

by Julia Menaul

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How to Handle Complaints

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Hello, I’m Julia Menaul.

As an experienced executive coach, career coach and coach mentor supervisor, I specialise in Learning and Development of people and the organisations they work for.

With over 20 years’ experience and a whole host of coaching and training qualifications, I base my success, and the success of my clients, on my ability to tap into people’s hidden potential and reveal it. Helping them to become confident and effective leaders, managers and coaches.

**My Key Coaching and training Qualifications**

* Accredited Coach with the Association for Coaching
* Advanced Professional Diploma in Executive Coaching from Leeds Metro University.
* Certificate in Supervision from the Bath Consultancy Group
* Diploma in Supervision from the Coaching Supervision Academy.
* Fellow of CIPD (Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development)
* Fellow of ITOL (Institute of Training & Occupational Learning)
* Licensed and specialist in Thomas Emotional Intelligence Assessment
* Member and regional coordinator for AOCS (Association of Coaching Supervisors)

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# WHAT YOU WILL GET FROM THIS GUIDE

Front line staff and SME business owners often have the responsibility for handling customer complaints whether by email or by a letter. It can be difficult sometimes to strike the right balance with complaints, and we can end up being either over defensive, aggressive or evasive.

This Guide will help you if you need to take more responsibility for handling complaints. It will improve not only your effectiveness in handling complaints, but also your willingness to do so.

It provides you with standard guidelines and tools, as well as helping you understand the underlying psychology of human behaviour when people complain.

Once you’ve finished this Guide, you’ll know how to:

* State the different options for replying to a complaint and how to make a decision on the correct route
* Identify your assertiveness style with complaints
* Understand the theories that explain why humans interact differently with each other and in different ways
* Practise putting yourself in the customer’s shoes to understand the nature of complaints
* Developed an action plan to continue learning within the workplace

# PART 1 - YOUR INTERNAL DIALOGUE V EXTERNAL DIALOGUE

This section deals with the impact of inner dialogue on the way we speak with others.

At the end of it, you will be able to:

* Identify examples of your inner dialogue which could negatively affect your behaviour when dealing with a complaint
* Turn negative inner dialogue into positive talk
* Name some filters that affect our perception of reality
* Understand how to create different outcomes by controlling our own behaviour

## What is the Internal Dialogue v External Dialogue?

Everyone engages in inner dialogue. Inner dialogue is no more than imagining details of a situation that is yet to happen, or an internal debate about what you will do. For some people, sometimes, the dialogue is very clear, while for others, and at other times, the imagining may be visual images, either clear or jumbled, or even just feelings or vague impressions.

*“I’ve been through some dreadful things in my life, and some of them have actually happened”.*

Mark Twain

The impact of our inner dialogue is extremely powerful because it forms an unconscious expectation that influences our behaviour in forthcoming situations. Our inner dialogue is influenced by our beliefs, which in turn are influenced by the meaning we give to our past experiences.

Take this scenario for instance - you are about to go into a job interview. You may have an inner dialogue with yourself that involves a number of assumptions about the situation.

List some of your assumptions about your interview below.

### 🏳 Exercise - Check The Assumptions You Make

Here’s some typical responses. You may have added some of your own.

* I must have all the correct answers.
* They will try to trip me up.
* They will ask me things I don’t know.
* I’ll probably make a mess of it.

As a result of these , you are more likely to give the impression that you are unsure which may induce the very behaviour that you feared. Following a sincere inquiry about a point that you have made, you may respond with a limp answer because you feel less than confident.

*When faced with difficult situations such as this, you can discuss with yourself, mentally, how you will behave, perhaps reminding yourself to breathe deeply to reduce any stress response.*

## Turning Negative Thinking Into More Positive Talk

Your inner dialogue will strongly influence the outcome of a situation. So catch yourself thinking negatively, and work on more positive talk.

Here’s some examples:

* **Negative:** I must have all the correct answers.
* **Positive:** I know my area well; I don’t have to know everything, in fact most people warm to honesty and vulnerability in others.
* **Negative**: They will try to trip me up.
* **Positive:** They are just trying to find out if I am right for the job. It will also help me decide if the job is right for me.
* **Negative**: I’ll probably make a mess of it.
* **Positive:** I don’t know everything and its unlikely they would expect that. I will just do my best and be honest about what I don’t know.

It is easy to see how this is likely to positively affect your performance. And then you have a much more positive experience to add to your database of beliefs. Talking yourself into a more positive but realistic state can be among the most empowering conversations you ever hold.

*Positive self-talk and visualising a desirable scenario and outcome are common behaviours for most successful people.*

## Perception v Reality

Each of us has our own perception of events and situations. Many of us regard our perception as ‘truth’ or ‘reality’. When other people’s perceptions differ, we may regard them as misguided, naïve, wrong, or even as liars.

**FACED WITH OPPOSING PERCEPTIONS SOME OF US MAY HOLD OUR OWN PERCEPTIONS IN SIMILAR DISREGARD, AND BOW TO ANOTHER’S PERCEPTION AS BEING THE TRUE REALITY.**

But perceptions do not equate to reality. In any situation there are many stimuli, some of which may be sensed but many of which will be missed, at least at a conscious level. According to research from the psychologist, Miller, we are only able to hold between five and nine items in our conscious at a time. We filter out stimuli to avoid overload. Sometimes we do it consciously, making decisions about what to focus on, but usually filtering is unconscious.

For example, what is precious about a diamond? When did a feather stop being a writing implement? When we begin to assign meaning to people’s speech and behaviour the range of possible interpretations becomes enormous.



*The more perceptions a person can accept as alternative views of reality, the closer they will come to reality and harmony.*

## Experiences That Influence our Perception Of Reality

Here’s some examples of how our perceptions can be influenced.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Conscious Experiences | Subconscious Experiences |
| See | Culture |
| Hear | Parents |
| Touch | Teachers |
| Taste | Peers & Significant others |
| Smell | Media e.g. TV, Adverts, Press, Books |

### 🏳 Exercise - When Have You Been Positively Influenced?

List some personal experiences that you know ***positively*** influenced your perception of reality - that is, how it changed the way you saw something compared to your previous impressions.

This might be when a customer you dealt with helped you be more tolerant of the views of a minority group, or an exchange with a customer which helped you understand an age group that you don’t usually mix with (eg elderly/teenage).

### 🏳 Exercise - When Have You Been Negatively Influenced?

Now list some personal experiences that you know ***negatively*** influenced your perception of reality - they helped to create a negative feeling about someone or something.

Use these as examples: poor customer service in a restaurant or shop; or a rude taxi driver which “put you off for life”. A difficult teacher so you hated school/learning as an adult.

# PART 2 - LEARNING ASSERTIVENESS TECHNIQUES

In this section you will learn:

* + The Three Steps to Assertiveness
  + How and when to use Discrepancy Assertion

## The Tree Steps To Assertiveness

There are three simple steps to assertiveness. It is important when learning the skills of assertiveness that you understand and practise all three and in order. It may seem a bit cumbersome at first, but with practice it can become a habit.

* + **Step One**

Actively listen to what is being said to you and then say something to acknowledge that you have heard and understood the person.

* + **Step Two**

Say what you think or feel.

* + **Step Three**

Say what you want to happen.

**Step One**forces you to focus on what the other person is saying and really listen, rather than use the time in which they speak to build up a defence or attack. By actively listening, you are able to demonstrate some understanding and empathy for their situation or point of view, even if you do not wholly agree with it.

**Step Two**enables you to directly state your thoughts or feelings without insistence or apology.

**Step Three**is essential as it allows you to indicate clearly what action or outcome you want without hesitancy or insistence.

You may need to repeat these stages a number of times before a satisfactory solution is reached. The technique is not the ultimate solution to dealing with people. It does, however, provide a framework which allows you to remain assertive, without crushing anyone else in the process. The basic framework can be enhanced by the various techniques and behaviour that surround assertiveness.

## How Discrepancy Assertion Can Help You

Discrepancy Assertion can be used in situations where you are receiving contradictory messages. The word “discrepancy” in this case, means when there may be a mismatch between what a person has originally said/done and what they are saying/doing now.

In a fast-paced, fast changing work scenario, contradictory messages are one of the by-products. It is important to be clear about what is happening or expected without having to resort to guessing.

Discrepancy Assertion helps to clear up misunderstandings before they grow into difficult issues.

It is also a useful way to point out to someone the inconsistency in their behaviour without blaming or accusing and it helps to move people nearer to a workable compromise.

It is important to be as objective as possible, pointing out the known facts clearly.

## The Three stages of Discrepancy Assertion

* STAGE One

State the original situation.

* STAGE Two

State the changed situation, thereby highlighting the discrepancy.

* StAGE Threee

State what you suggest to clear things up.

***An example of Discrepancy Assertion…..***

*“ At the start of the call, you mentioned that the heating had been broken for 6 hours, however you’ve just said that it was broken last night at 11 pm which is 12 hours. I’d like to be clear about the length of time you’ve actually been without heating so I can help you.”*

### 🏳 Exercise - Using Discrepancy Assertion

Think of a real life situation where you found a complaint difficult to handle, and where the outcome was not satisfactory. Try to remember the actual conversation, if you can.

* 1. Write down what the Customer Said
  2. Write down what You Said
  3. Write down the Outcome

Rewrite the scene using the Three Stages of Discrepancy Assertion.

1. What the Customer Said (this will be the same as in the above real life situation)
2. What You could Say
3. The Possible Outcome

IT IS IMPORTANT TO BE AS OBJECTIVE AS POSSIBLE, POINTING OUT THE KNOWN FACTS CLEARLY!

# PART 3 - HANDLING COMPLAINTS

Here’s where you’ll learn further tools, tips and guidelines for handling complaints.

* Styles of Behaviour
* Saying “No”
* Broken Record
* Sending Replies to Complaints by Email and Letter

## Styles Of Behaviour

In any situation, people demonstrate one of three basic styles of behaviour:

* Aggressive
* Passive
* Assertive

The emotions, thoughts and feelings a person is experiencing are going on below the surface. We can only guess at the emotions, thoughts and feelings of another. But the clues are usually in their behaviour. Behaviour is the “tip of the iceberg”.

We can recognise the type of behaviour by what they do and what they say.

Behaviour styles are also typically revealed by indicators, eg facial expressions, tone and pitch of voice, gestures, posture, vocabulary, breathing patterns and so on. For example, someone banging on a table is exhibiting indicators of ***aggressive behaviour***. Whilst somebody looking down and wringing their hands is exhibiting indicators of ***passive behaviour***.

Your judgement, intuition and life experience all help you to interpret and understand another’s behaviour. Some people are particularly good at picking up the clues. Emotionally intelligent people do this well, and it is possible to improve your emotional intelligence.

However, if you are dealing with customers primarily on the phone you are at a disadvantage, as you cannot observe their visible body language (gestures, etc). Equally, if you are dealing with anyone by email, you have probably experienced that your intentions can be misunderstood. Emoticons in emails ‘’are an attempt to convey intentions.

### 🏳Exercise - Recognising The Different Style Indicators

* Read the following behaviour **style** indicators.
* Think about a time when a customer exhibited some of these behaviours.
* Think about a time when you may have exhibited some of these behaviours

The Aggressive Style

When we behave aggressively, we:

1. Interrupt others when they are speaking
2. Try to impose our position on others
3. Speak in a tone and manner which draws attention to ourselves
4. Put others down verbally
5. Find fault with others in a destructive and negative manner
6. Accuse or blame others, rather than accepting responsibility ourselves
7. Try to inconvenience or harm others rather than ourselves
8. Bypass the issue, distort the facts, or bend the truth to get our solutions accepted quickly
9. Consider ourselves stronger or more capable than others
10. Take on positions of power and authority in order to manipulate others and control situations in a negative way

The Passive Style

We reveal a passive style when we:

1. Sit back in groups
2. Avoid making a stand; sit on the fence when we don’t really want to
3. Allow others to make decisions for us
4. Keep our voices low and avoid eye contact in order to prevent drawing attention to ourselves
5. Verbally agree with others despite our real feelings
6. Allow ourselves to be disadvantaged, rather than inconvenience anyone else
7. Put off things to avoid making a decision or solving a problem
8. Consider ourselves weaker and less capable that others
9. Make excuses to escape responsibility
10. Complain that things are not going our way but refuse to do anything constructive about it

The Assertive Style

*“Seek first to understand; then, to be understood.”*

Stephen Covey (The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People)

We are assertive when we:

1. Allow others to complete what they are saying before we speak
2. State our viewpoint calmly and clearly
3. Make our own decisions based on what we feel is right
4. Try to acknowledge the feelings of others before stating our own
5. Talk things through with others before problems escalate
6. Face problems and decisions squarely
7. Consider ourselves strong and capable, but generally equal to most others
8. Have realistic expectations about the outcomes of a situation
9. Are interested in a positive result for ourselves and others
10. Believe that in order to win, others need not necessarily lose
11. View negotiation and compromise within reason as a positive thing.

### 🏳Exercise - Choose Three Assertive Behaviours To Use Now

Pick three ***assertive*** behaviours from the above list that you will consciously use from now on.

## Saying “No”

We have all heard the phrase “the customer is always right”. But there are times when you will have to say “No” to a customer. There are many reasons for this:

* What the customer is requesting (or demanding) is illegal
* What the customer is requesting is against company policy
* The company does not have the resources (finance, manpower, time, product availability) to meet the request

So why is saying “No” tremendously difficult for many people? There are many different reasons why people find it so hard.

See if you recognise any of the reasons below:

* You just like to please others and feel that “No” would be an unwelcome response.
* You are afraid of the aggressive reaction a “No” might be provoke.
* You are not really sure what the company policy is (for example, refunds), and think that saying “Yes” is the easiest route to get the customer ‘off your back’.
* You feel that saying “Yes” gives a good impression of the company.

### 🏳Exercise - When Did You Say “Yes” Instead Of “No”?

Think of some other examples from your working life and record them below.

## How To Say “No” Assertively

If your first reaction is to say “No” then it is important for you to think about why you want to say “No".

If you believe it to be the right response then you should find a way to say it as directly as possible. Direct communication respects you and respects the customer.

Direct communication means:

* without making excuses
* without beating about the bush
* without giving long winded explanations

**THE KEY TO AN ASSERTIVE ”NO” IS TO REMEMBER THAT:**

*You have the right to say ”No” without guilt.*

Saying “No” firmly and reasonably is quite acceptable to most people and much better than letting them down later.

What kind of things do you find hard to say “No” to? Is it doing favours for friends? Taking on extra work for a senior person? Giving money to doorstep callers?

🏳Exercise - What Do You Find It Hard To Say “No” To?

List a couple of things that you find hard to say “No” to below.

*Saying “No” becomes easier with practise. It can save you a lot of worry and lack of self-respect later. It is worth trying.*

## The ‘Broken Record’ Technique

‘Broken Record’ is a useful tool to make sure you are listened to and that your message is received.

Some of the benefits of using Broken Record technique are:

* + Broken Record helps you avoid resorting to aggressive behaviour
  + You can get your message across to a customer who is not paying attention (because of their own concerns or needs)
  + You can avoid using passive behaviour like whinging and whining
  + You can get your message across in an assertive but polite way
  + You can avoid long-winded explanations and lengthy calls
  + Using Broken Record puts you in control of the conversation
  + You will feel much calmer as a result

Children are experts in the use of the Broken Record technique and use it very effectively. You have probably overheard a child endlessly repeating “I want an ice cream”, until they get one!

## How To Use ‘Broken Record’

1. Keep on repeating the message until it can no longer be ignored or dismissed.
2. Use some of the same words over and over again in different sentences.

* There is no need to raise your voice; keep your tone even and keep repeating your message.
* Using the same words reinforces the main part of your message and prevents others raising red herrings or diverting you from your central message

🏳Exercise - Practise This Example Of ‘Broken Record’

***“We won’t be able to complete by the 15th.*** I understand this causes you problems, but the hard facts are that ***it won’t be possible to complete*** all the work by ***the 15th.*** We could, however, complete some of the key areas by then and the rest by a later date. What we can’t do is ***complete all of it by the 15th.***

🏳Exercise - Putting Broken Record Technique Into Action

Look at the following scenarios and think how you would handle them using the ‘Broken Record’technique.

1. Decide the main points of what you want to get across. This is your ‘message’.
2. Draft out your conversation, using ‘Broken Record’ technique.

* A friend of yours wants to borrow your car. You are not using your car on the date in question but you do not want to say yes as you make it a rule never to lend your car to anyone.
* You are tired after a long day at work. You have worked late a lot recently and at 3.00pm, your manager asks you if you could stay late again tonight. You have made arrangements for a quiet evening in and really do not want stay on at work.
* A customer is refusing to give you a contact telephone number even though you inform them that you cannot proceed with their request until you do.

# PART 4 - YOUR ACTION PLAN FOR THE FUTURE

In this Guide, you have learnt:

* The different options for replying to a complaint and how to make a decision on the correct route
* Identified your assertiveness style with complaints
* Examined theories that explain why humans interact differently with each other and in different ways.
* Practised putting yourself in the customer’s shoes to understand the nature of complaints.

Now, reflect back on what you have learnt, and create a simple action plan.

🏳Exercise - Work Out Your Action Plan

What are you going to do differently as a result of your learning?

How will you know this has made a difference? How will others know?

When will you do this?

What resources or help do you need to make a start?

[](mailto:support@sparkcoachingandtraining.co.uk)How Can We Help You Find Your Fire?

Contact us now to book an appointment for a complimentary, no obligation 30 minute call with me to discuss your particular coaching, training or coach supervision needs.

And don’t forget to check out our website [Spark Coaching and Training](http://www.sparkcoachingandtraining.co.uk/) for further details and our regular blog which is full of insightful articles relating to coaching, training, coach supervision and productivity tips

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