

Complaints Communications Guidance

Communicating with Complainants

- Any verbal and written communication should be polite, sensitive and empathetic, and build rapport with the person you are communicating with. You can do this by:
 - writing or speaking in a friendly but professional way
 - when having a conversation, giving the other person the opportunity to talk, and demonstrating active listening
 - asking questions and recapping to ensure clarity, giving parties the opportunity to confirm understanding is accurate
 - corresponding in a respectful tone
- You can show empathy by:
 - acknowledging the individual's feelings and experience
 - repeating words and phrases they have used in their communication to show you have listened carefully and understand what they have told you
 - thanking them for taking the time to share information and for sharing their perspective of the issue identified or being complained about
 - when appropriate, acknowledging any hardship the complainant outlines they experienced
- You should manage communication by:
 - being clear with the complainant when they should expect to hear from you or when they will receive a response
 - making sure any agreed reasonable adjustments and communication preferences are observed
 - keeping a record of conversations

Apology Guide**DO**

An apology should be personal, written for the specific occasion and be sensitive to the context in which the apology is being made.

It will include:

- an expression of empathy; 'I was sorry to read about the difficulties you encountered'
- an acceptance of what has gone wrong; 'Staff didn't ensure that you understood the procedure you needed to follow'
- an acceptance of responsibility; 'The guidance document could be made clearer on this point'

- an acknowledgement of the effect the problems have had for the other person; 'you experienced significant delays and were left not knowing what was happening'
- an explanation of why the problem occurred; 'Our computer system was down for routine maintenance and your data was not uploaded when the system went back on-line'
- a description of anything that is being done to put matters right for the person directly concerned and/or to help avoid the problem happening again in the future; 'we have updated our process to provide greater guidance to teams dealing with external assessments and reminded the team that all applications flagged must be checked'.

DON'T

Expressing empathy and apologising fails when we:

- distance ourselves from the fault; 'I apologise for ANY faults'. If there were no faults we don't need to apologise for these (though empathy will still be helpful) and if there were then we should admit to them
- shift the blame in whole or part to others; 'I am sorry this happened BUT it was someone else's fault'. Worst of all is if we seek to blame the person raising the issue 'I am sorry but if you hadn't been late then ..'
- give the impression we are only apologising because we are being forced to; 'I have been told I should apologise'
- trivialise the problem; 'no one else raised the issue'
- question whether the other person has actually suffered; 'I am sorry IF you were upset'

Source Materials

Communicating Source: UK Central Government Complaint Standards, "[Clarifying the complaint and explaining the process](#)"

Apology Source: Scottish Public Services Ombudsman, "[How to make a good apology](#)"