



The H.E.A.T model for managing challenging interactions

The H.E.A.T model is a behavioural model that can be used to handle complaints and aims to reduce the complainants' anger and calm them down while focusing on solving the problem or issue wherever possible.

H - Hear them out!

The first step in dealing with a complaining, angry or upset person is to control your own and their emotions. Allow the person to tell you what has happened and do not interrupt during this process. Listen attentively and wait until they have finished speaking before you attempt to resolve their issue. People are not interested in resolving the situation until they have fully expressed their situation. Always hear the person out – from beginning to end – before offering an option or responding.

At this point, it is crucial to remain calm. Try to keep personalities out of the situation. Look at the issues objectively and keep your emotions under control. This can be a real challenge when someone is exhibiting challenging behaviour. Try not to take it personally and remind yourself that normally the person is angry because of the situation, not you personally therefore it is important to focus on the issue / problem and work to solve it together. Remember that the person making the complaint will not be interested in resolving the situation until they have fully expressed their emotions.

Tips!

- Listen and do not interrupt
- Display open and neutral body language if you are face-to-face, a neutral calm tone to your voice (over the phone), and a polite, professional writing tone in emails
- Show signs of listening and being attentive by nodding and eye contact, or by acknowledging that you are listening if you are on the telephone
- Take notes of key points, names, and dates
- Remember to focus on the issue, not on the behaviour

Once the complainant has finished venting, ensure that you summarise your understanding of the issue to ensure absolute clarity of their complaint before progressing any further.

E – Empathise

Acknowledging and empathising with the complainants' level of emotion is an extremely important rapport-building tool.

By acknowledging emotions and the impact of the situation on the child and the family, it shows you are looking at the problem from their point of view. By empathising with them, you allow the person to direct their frustration and anger at the problem, rather than you. Empathise with the complainants' level of emotion by using sincere statements such as "I can appreciate that you are upset...". Attempting to problem solve before you have dealt with the person's emotions can be a mistake, as they will not be willing to listen to your suggestions.

When responding to the complainant, it is critical to make a distinction between sympathy and empathy. Sympathy involves identifying with, and even taking on their emotions, for example, "I'm really angry about what happened too, it annoys me as well", or "I know, it happens to parents all the time" whereas empathy is acknowledging their emotional state, for example "I can appreciate why you would be so angry about that." If you respond with sympathy, you will feel worn out and emotionally drained at the end of the day. The key is to be aware and sensitive to the complainant, without becoming emotionally involved. Responding with empathy will enable you to stay calm and in control, whilst still displaying high levels of professionalism and care.

A – Apologise, ask questions, and offer alternatives

Apologising is another way of connecting with the complainant. Offering a sincere apology does not admit blame; rather it establishes rapport. Even if you were not personally responsible, it is an acknowledgement that things aren't going well. Ensure apologies are sincere and personal, for example "I am sorry that you have been kept waiting..." or "I am sorry this has inconvenienced you today..." and timely – the sooner, the better. Apologising helps to put the complainant at ease and also indicates your willingness to help.

Tips!

- Use "I'm sorry that this has happened" rather than "We are sorry", it has more of an impact
- Do not criticise the Department, another area, or another person, even if they are at fault
- Apologising has the impact of taking the complainant from an irrational state where it is more difficult to deal with them, to a rational state where it becomes easier to deal with them
- Even if you cannot meet the complainants' request, there are times when a genuine apology can diffuse the situation, for example "I am so sorry we are unable to..."

T - Take ownership

Taking ownership can mean either:

- Finding and presenting a solution
- Conducting further investigation and committing to a time frame to get back to the complainant
- Delivering an outcome or an explanation

There might be times when you will be able to find and present a solution or the issue can be resolved on the spot. This is always preferable as the more quickly an issue can be resolved, the better the outcome and the experience. Time is always a critical factor and your ability to be responsive is more important than ever.

You can let the complainant know you are taking responsibility by:

Finding a solution

- Clarify expectations
- Find a solution to the issue if possible
- Define the outcome required
- Generate realistic options

Presenting the solution

- Outline your recommendations
- Confirm the solution is suitable for them
- Explain the course of events, why the issue or problem has occurred
- Provide an explanation

Following up on the issue

- Keep the complainant informed at all times
- Inform any others that need to be kept informed

Taking ownership will make a huge difference to how the person you are dealing with feels about the outcome. By letting them know you will take ownership of their issue, you will be on your way to restoring their confidence. You can do the following to demonstrate ownership:

- Follow up after an issue, even if briefly to ensure the problem has been resolved
- Be proactive in raising issues that are affecting customer satisfaction. Look for ways to raise ongoing issues to focus on continuous improvement