

The ACE De-escalation Framework

Acknowledge · Clarify · Engage - three moves to bring an escalating complaint back under control

WHY WE'RE SHARING THIS

We've been noticing across a lot of customer service teams recently that complaint handling has got noticeably harder post-Covid. Customers are less patient and quicker to escalate. We've put together this short de-escalation framework that delegates have found really useful in the moment.

The ACE Framework - your three-step sequence for any complaint that's starting to boil over:

A

ACKNOWLEDGE

Hear them out - fully and visibly

Before anything else, show the customer their frustration has landed: *"I can hear how frustrated you are and I want to understand exactly what's happened."* Don't defend, explain, or justify - not yet. The brain under stress needs to feel heard before it can hear you. Nod, make eye contact, don't interrupt. This step removes a significant proportion of the heat on its own.

C

CLARIFY

Get to the real issue - not just the surface one

Most escalating complaints have a surface complaint and a real one underneath. Ask: *"Can I just check - is it the delay itself that's caused the problem, or is it the impact that delay has had on you?"* This shows you're treating them as an individual, not a ticket. It moves the conversation from emotion to information, which is far easier to solve.

E

ENGAGE

Solve it together - give them agency

Bring the customer into the solution: *"Here's what I can do right now - and here are two options I'd like to offer you."* People who feel they've had some control over the outcome are consistently more satisfied, even when the resolution is imperfect. Avoid 'there's nothing I can do.' There is always something. Start there, name it, and build from it.

SPOT THE EARLY SIGNS OF ESCALATION

Rising volume or pace · Repeated phrases or questions · References to 'last time' · Asking for a manager · Mentions of social media, reviews, or 'going further' all indicate a possible escalation of the complaint.

HINTS & TIPS FOR MANAGERS

- **Lower your voice, not just theirs:** When a customer raises their voice, resist the instinct to match it. Speaking calmly and slowly is contagious.
- **Never say 'please calm down':** It always has the opposite effect. Instead: "I want to sort this for you – can you help me understand what happened?"
- **Don't take it personally:** The frustration is about the situation, not you. Keeping that separation protects your professionalism and your well-being.
- **First-contact resolution is the goal:** Passing a complaint on costs time and trust. Resolve it now if at all possible. Customers remember who fixed it and with first-time resolution you stand a chance of turning a complainant into an advocate – these can be the strongest advocates for companies because of the emotional 'distance' travelled so the resolution feels even more significant.