

Handling Difficult Customer Interactions

A practical 35-minute course for front-line public service staff

Copperleaf County Public Services

Fictional organization created for this portfolio sample.

Prepared by Four Bells Learning Design

THE METHOD



Hear

Help the person feel heard.



Clarify

Make the situation clear.



Move

Give a useful next step.

A difficult interaction needs three things.

Not three tricks. Three outcomes the employee can actually create.

1

Feel heard

The employee shows they understand the concern before trying to solve it.

2

Know what is true

The employee separates the customer's need from assumptions, limits, or misinformation.

3

Know what happens next

The employee offers the best available next step - or escalates when that is the right step.

That becomes the whole course: HEAR -> CLARIFY -> MOVE

The interaction is difficult. The person is not “the problem.”

Label the situation, not the customer. It keeps the employee focused on what can be changed.

Pressure

Long waits, confusing rules, repeat visits, missed deadlines, or a service the person cannot access.

Emotion

Anger, fear, embarrassment, urgency, or frustration can make a simple issue harder to explain.

Limits

The employee may not control policy, eligibility, timing, fees, or the final decision.

The goal is not to “win” the conversation. The goal is to make the next useful move.

Hear. Clarify. Move.

Use the same sequence whether the issue is simple, emotional, or unresolved.



The sequence matters.

If you explain before the person feels heard, even correct information can sound dismissive.

First: help the person feel heard.

You do not have to agree with the complaint to show you understand it.



Do

Let them finish. Name the concern in neutral language.
Keep your first response short.

Try language like

“I can see why that is frustrating.”
“Let me make sure I have the issue right.”
“You came in today because...”

Avoid: “Calm down.” • “That is not our fault.” • “You need to...” before you have confirmed the issue.

Second: make the situation clear.

Find the actual need before offering a solution.



Ask just enough

- What happened?
- What does the person need today?
- What has already been tried?
- What constraint actually applies?

Then say what is true

Separate what you know from what you need to check. Explain limits without hiding behind policy language.

Useful sentence: “Here is what I can confirm, and here is what I still need to check.”

Third: give the person a real next step.

A clear “no” with a useful path is better than a vague “maybe.”



You can solve it

State what you will do, what the person needs to do, and when the next change should happen.

You cannot solve it

Name the limit plainly. Then offer the closest legitimate option instead of sending them away empty-handed.

You need help

Escalate when authority, safety, policy interpretation, or a repeated failure is beyond your role.

Close the loop: **“Before you go, let me make sure the next step is clear.”**

Activity: the third visit

Work in pairs. You have four minutes, then we will debrief together.

SCENARIO

A resident has come to the service counter for the third time about a permit. They were told last week that everything was complete. Today the system still shows one missing document. They say:

“I have already done this twice. I took off work again. Somebody here needs to fix it.”

You can see the missing-document flag, but you cannot tell whether the document was never received or was attached to the wrong case.

1 HEAR

What would you say first?

2 CLARIFY

What do you need to find out?

3 MOVE

What next step can you promise?

Same policy. Better conversation.

The language changes the experience without changing the rule.

LESS USEFUL

“You are missing a document.”

“That is the policy.”

“You will have to come back.”

MORE USEFUL

“You were told this was complete, and now you are hearing something different.”

“Let me confirm why the flag is there before I tell you what has to happen.”

“If we cannot resolve it here, I will tell you exactly who can and what they will need.”

Notice: the stronger version does not promise an outcome the employee cannot control.

Can you choose the next move?

Answer individually, then compare with a partner.

1

A customer interrupts your explanation and repeats the complaint.

HEAR first - summarize the concern before adding more information.

2

You are unsure whether an exception applies.

CLARIFY - separate what you know from what you need to check.

3

The answer is no, but another legitimate option exists.

MOVE - state the limit, then offer the useful alternative.

HEAR the concern. CLARIFY what is true. MOVE to the next useful step.