

Ask the Experts



The Great Privilege and Greater Responsibility of Serving the Public

By Emanuela Tala, Associate, Liebert Cassidy Whitmore

We often hear it said that “the customer is always right.” But public agencies do not simply sell customers a particular product. Instead, they are tasked with providing essential services and maintaining order in our civilized society. Unlike private sector employees, public sector employees take an oath to uphold the California and federal Constitutions against all enemies, foreign and domestic. Upon taking their oath and assuming their responsibilities, public employees are also declared to be disaster service workers. How, then, can we ensure that the customer is always right when a public servant is charged with such lofty duties and the customer is not simply a consumer, but rather, a taxpayer, a business owner or patron, a citizen, a tourist, or a visitor?

An important starting point is the understanding that public perception is crucial to public service. In a never-ending cycle, public perception informs how individuals interact with and relate to public employees and, in turn, public employees’ conduct informs public perception. Public employees must have an understanding of the laws

requiring a transparent government, such as the California Public Records Act and the Brown Act, the laws prohibiting conflicts of interest, such as Government Code section 1090 and the Political Reform Act, and the laws prohibiting discrimination, harassment, and retaliation, such as the Fair Employment and Housing Act and Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. An understanding of these laws will permit public servants to engage in meaningful dialogue with the public they serve, be it orally or in writing, in connection with commonly arising concerns.

Public servants are also often called upon to serve as diplomats, mediators, and conciliators in their dialogue and dealings with the public. In that sense, public servants truly do become the face of their agencies or departments to those individuals with whom they interact and must therefore be able to remain respectful and responsive, even in heated and uncomfortable situations. To that end, public employees benefit greatly from acquiring and implementing the skills necessary to engage in difficult

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conversations, including the importance of keeping the content of their communications clear, the tone of their communications neutral, and the phrasing of their communications temperate. Public employees will also benefit greatly from adopting and implementing customer service guidelines that best allow them to respond to the public, including timelines for returning calls and emails, and a framework for answering calls, referring individuals to online resources or other agency members, and composing short but comprehensive voicemail greetings and automated out of office email responses. These simple, but often overlooked, communication tools allow members of the public to feel cared for and heard.

The great responsibility of serving the public is not an easy endeavor. However, by understanding the relevant laws and the skills necessary to engage in meaningful communication, public servants can undoubtedly rise to this important challenge.



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Learn more in person with Emanuela Tala at the General Manager Leadership Summit session "Stellar Public Sector Customer Service" in Anaheim in June!

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