The IHG Frontline learning platform, and the information contained in this manual, have been developed as instructional resources for owners of franchise hotels. The training, information and processes contained herein, are intended to serve as general advice and resources about selected topics, with the expectation that owners and operators will use and adapt elements that they believe are appropriate for the particular hotel that they are responsible for operating and for their particular business circumstances. The IHG Frontline training is not designed to provide complete, specific information and instructions on all topics. No licensee is required to abide by any other terms of the IHG Frontline training or accompanying resources. No company in IHG, nor any employee thereof, has any involvement in employee-related decisions at franchise hotels.
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1. Introduction

1.1 Introducing Problem Handling

This course is going to help you realise that every problem is a gift, and will show you how to make the most of it.

On average, 24 out of 100 Guests experience a problem during their stay. While not all Guests report their problems, 50% of people who do report a problem say it was not handled well. Our Heartbeat survey shows that when a problem is handled well, the overall Guest satisfaction score is up to 25 points higher than when a problem is not handled effectively.

54%–70% of Guests will return if they were satisfied with how we handled their problems.

This percentage increases to 95% if a solution was found in less than one hour.

This course will ensure:

- You are introduced to problem handling.
- You know how to control your emotions and handle Guest emotions.
- You can apply the ILEAD principles.
- You are shown how to handle some common issues Guests complain about.

Make sure that you have a pen and your workbook with you while you watch the video lessons and read through this manual. There will be opportunities for you to write down important points and answer questions.

Complete Question 1 in your workbook.

Remember!
The more you watch the lessons, the more you will learn and build the confidence to handle problems with skill.

Enjoy learning more about this interesting topic.
1.2 Understanding Problem Handling

Most people complain when they don’t receive what they thought they should have received – their expectations have not been met. Guests expect friendly service, clean and well-maintained facilities, and a level of service that is consistent with what they have paid.

1. What problem handling is.

Definition:
Problem handling, or service recovery, is the process of working through the details of a problem or complaint to reach a solution.

In practice, this means identifying a problem, listening to all of the details, empathising, apologising, and finding a suitable solution or alternative.

2. The importance of handling problems to the Guest’s satisfaction.

Problem handling is an important driver of Guest satisfaction, as measured by our HeartBeat Overall Experience score. HeartBeat is an online survey that is sent to Guests after check-out to assess the quality of their overall experience.

Remember, 24 out of every 100 Guests have a complaint. 7 of these 24 Guests won’t tell anyone about their problem, and of the 17 that do tell someone about their problem, 8 say their problem was not handled well.

This means, 8 Guests are disappointed twice. Once when their problem occurs, and then again when the problem isn’t handled properly. The 7 Guests who do not report their problem represent a missed opportunity for us to provide a solution and change their perception.

Remember! When things go wrong, it’s how you handle the situation that matters most to your Guests.

Your Guests expect you to take ownership of undesirable situations and resolve them quickly. When you deal with problems and complaints properly, you build greater loyalty and trust with your Guests.

Definition:
Building loyalty means that Guests will choose our hotel more often, spend more time with us when they stay, and recommend us to their friends and family.

What’s in it for you?
Good problem handling skills will:
• Boost your confidence.
• Give you courage.
• Help you to better deal with problems.
• Help you to anticipate possible problem areas.

3. Why Guests complain.

Guests complain when they feel their expectations have not been met. Here are a few possible scenarios:

a. The Guest didn’t receive what was advertised.
b. The Guest received poor service.
c. The condition of the property was poor.
d. The property wasn’t clean.
e. The Guest was disappointed by the food and beverage quality.

In each of these cases there are different levels of complaints. The Guest may not always complain to the hotel directly, but they may complain to friends and family or even post a report on Guest Review or on social media, and the HeartBeat scores will be disappointing. It could also lead to bad word-of-mouth, and we could lose potential Guests.

Complete Activity 1 in your workbook.

Complete Question 2 in your workbook.
2. Problem Handling and Emotions

2.1 Introducing Problem Handling and Emotions

Dealing with Guest complaints can be difficult because it involves dealing with emotions. Remember, by the time a Guest complains, the problem has already made a big impact on their experience!

Consider this...
Think back to an experience you had when your expectations were not met. The problem most likely had a big impact on your experience and was unpleasant. It is very important to keep this in mind when dealing with Guest complaints.

Complete Activity 2 in your workbook.

Since each situation generates different emotions, every Guest will react differently – this means that no two complaints are the same. Each incident will have different levels of emotion. The way you deal with Guests' problems will either increase the Guest's negative emotional state and make the situation worse for everyone, or decrease it – ending in a very positive experience.

1. The role of emotions in problem handling.

Definition:
Emotion refers to the feelings or sentiments that someone experiences in a given situation. These feelings may not always seem reasonable to you but they are still very real.

Remember!
The Guest’s complaint is not aimed at you: don’t take it personally! Make it your personal goal to provide excellent service recovery.

Soon you will have the confidence and skill to anticipate problems, and minimise them.
2.2 Controlling Your Emotions

Consider this...

Have you ever been very angry with a friend? How did you communicate your feelings to them? Imagine how much easier that interaction would have been if you knew how to control your emotions.

1. Your mindset.

When dealing with Guests who complain, especially when they are very emotional, we may feel personally attacked.

It is very important to remember that the complaint is not directed at us, but rather at the situation at hand.

You should also remember that the Guest may not be reacting to the situation, but to the impact it is having on their experience.

Sometimes a Guest may become angry and rude and may exaggerate.

2. Communication tips.

Verbal communication. Do you speak pleasantly and convey a positive attitude? Consider the tone and pitch of your voice and pay attention to the words you choose and how they might be perceived. Ask open-ended questions to allow the Guest to explain their problem to you.

Non-verbal communication. Your body language, how you look, and how you act, are all part of non-verbal communication. Make sure you smile, establish eye contact and have good posture.

Complete Question 3 in your workbook.
The following case studies will look at how we can use these communication tips when dealing with Guests in the following difficult situations. Consider your reaction to the different Guests.

Case study 1: Mrs Stone

A Guest has just told you about a problem with her meal – her soup is cold! You could say:

‘I’m very sorry. I can see how cold soup would be frustrating, Mrs Stone. Please allow me to fix it for you right away.’

When you have an upset Guest, it’s important that you remain positive and professional, and acknowledge and restate their concern. This shows that you have been listening actively, that you understand and that you are personally interested in getting the problem resolved. Using the Guest’s name will help build rapport. Show the Guest that you wish to act immediately to rectify the situation. This demonstrates that you have authority to handle the complaint.

Case study 2: Miss Tan

In this situation you fixed the problem but the Guest still seems unsatisfied. Even though you have replaced Miss Tan’s salad with a fresh serving, she is still unhappy. Say:

‘I can see you are disappointed with our service. What else can we do to make it right?’

This works because you’re not assuming what the right solution is. Involve the Guest by asking open ended questions. Often, the Guest is not looking for compensation but an apology and only by involving them will you find out what you need to do.

Case study 3: Mr Casanova

Although you have worked very hard and professionally to resolve Mr Casanova’s complaint, he accuses you of making a variety of mistakes with a hostile attitude. Try asking: ‘I am truly concerned about your satisfaction and would like to change your perception. What can I do to change it?’ Don’t react with hostility. This works because demonstrating a sincere interest in learning what has upset your Guest can give you the information you need to turn their attitude around.

‘Let’s start over and see what I can do to resolve your concerns.’

This positive attitude can alter the conversation from a confrontational position to one of resolution. It may also be necessary to inform a supervisor of the situation. This will ensure that Guests understand that we take their problems seriously.

Remember!
There is a reason your Guest is reacting a certain way and they have the right to be upset.

If the conversation still proves difficult, try saying:

‘I’m very sorry. I can see how cold soup would be frustrating, Mrs Stone. Please allow me to fix it for you right away.’

‘I can see you are disappointed with our service. What else can we do to make it right?’

This works because you’re not assuming what the right solution is. Involve the Guest by asking open ended questions. Often, the Guest is not looking for compensation but an apology and only by involving them will you find out what you need to do.

Top Tips:
• Try to escort a complaining Guest out of sight and earshot of others.

Make notes in your workbook so that you can better remember this information on how to control your emotions.
3. ILEAD

3.1 Introduction to ILEAD

Complete Activity 3 in your workbook.

1. ILEAD

This is the set of principles that we follow at IHG when we handle problems for our Guests.

- **Identify** that there is an opportunity to handle a problem.

- **Listen** actively and determine the impact on the Guest. Pick up clues about how they are feeling.

- **Apologise** because showing sincere concern is critical in retaining Guests, and effectively handling problems.

- **Deliver** the solution by making suggestions and tailoring them to suit the Guest.

- **Empathise** with the Guest so that you can offer sensitive and appropriate solutions, and make your Guest feel heard and respected.

Through this, you will be handling problems for Guests in a professional way. You will be helping people in a kind way by listening, caring, being humble, and sincerely trying to help.
3.2 Identifying the Problem

Definition:
Identifying a problem means recognising that there is an opportunity to handle a problem or complaint for a Guest and improve their stay with us.

1. The importance of identifying problems.

Not all Guests will tell us when they have a problem.

On average 24 out of 100 Guests have a problem. Only 17 of them tell us about their problem which means 7 leave without reporting it. Some of these Guests will report their complaints on social media, such as Facebook or TripAdvisor, after they have already checked out. This gives us no chance to rectify the situation.

Statistics also show that problems rectified during the stay result in higher Guest satisfaction and loyalty to the brand. These Guests are more likely to tell their peers about their great experience.

2. Non-verbal clues.

It is easy to identify a problem when a Guest tells you exactly what is bothering them, but Guests do not always feel comfortable sharing this information.

Non-verbal clues that show a Guest is experiencing problems:

a. Sighing or rolling their eyes.
b. Avoiding eye contact or looking down.

c. Speaking quietly.
d. Speaking in short, clipped sentences.
e. Looking around for help.
f. Shaking their head.
g. Passive behaviour, such as leaving food untouched.
h. Aggressive behaviour, such as throwing objects down.

3. Identifying indirect comments or concerns.

a. Sarcasm.
b. Confusion.
c. Surprise.
d. Hesitation.

This means that the Guest has a problem. You have to find out what it is. Ask Guests if there is anything that you can help them with. Ask open-ended questions, such as:

- 'Mr Jones, how may I assist?'
- 'Mrs Jones, how may I help?'
- 'Mrs Rhode, how has your stay been so far?'

You have to be proactive in identifying problems.
This means that you have to approach Guests and ask questions about their stay, for example:

- 'Mr Jones, how may I assist?'
- 'Mrs Jones, how may I help?'
- 'Mrs Rhode, how has your stay been so far?'
You could conduct courtesy calls at the correct times and ask questions that show your Guests that you care and want to know if they are enjoying their stay. This is not only important during a Guest’s stay, but also at their departure. When Guests are checking out, use this interaction as a final opportunity to make sure that your Guests leave happy.

**Top Tips:**

- Be proactive!
- Make it easy for Guests to report problems and complaints.
- Encourage the Guest to share their concerns.
- Ask open-ended questions.
- Look for non-verbal clues.
- Listen for indirect comments or concerns.
- Conduct courtesy calls.
- At departure, ensure the Guest leaves feeling happy.

Complete Activity 4 and Activity 5 in your workbook.
3.3 Listen

Once you have identified a problem or complaint, it is very important that you listen actively to it.

1. What active listening is.

Definition:
Active listening involves giving the Guest your full attention. It means making sure that you understand what the problem is, and how the Guest feels about it.

2. Why and how to listen actively.

You should listen actively so that you can clearly understand the problem and deliver an appropriate solution. When you don't listen actively, you start making assumptions.

Don't assume anything about the Guest or their problem.

Top Tips:

To actively listen:
- Smile.
- Nod.
- Lean in slightly.
- Turn your body towards the Guest.
- Make eye contact.
- Ask clarifying questions.
- Stay focused on the Guest.
- Write down key points.

Over the phone:
Repeat information back to the Guest. Confirm your understanding. Indicate with your tone of voice that you are listening actively.
3. Why and how to make sure you understand the problem.

Only if you understand the problem can you deliver the right solution.
You can make sure that you understand by asking clarifying questions that confirm your understanding of the issue. For example:

Don't allow distractions, like speaking to another Guest who is waiting to check out. When we get distracted, it is impossible to listen actively.

'I just want to be sure that I understood you correctly. So, the mini fridge is broken and the remote is not working?'

'Don't interrupt Guests at any point.'

'May I just confirm that I understood the problem, Mr Jonas?'

Answer Question 5 in your workbook.
3.4 Empathise

When a Guest tells you about their problems, you have to show them that you understand them and that you care. When you empathise, the Guest is likely to feel more comfortable and give you more detail about what is bothering them.

1. Importance of showing empathy.

Definition:
Empathy allows us to understand Guests better and handle their problems with more sensitivity.

Two examples of phrases that show that you understand and feel empathy towards your Guest:

- ‘Miss Potter, I completely agree and understand why you are upset.’
- ‘I absolutely see your point of view, Mr Higgins.’

Remember!
Even when you might not understand why a Guest is upset, it is important that you empathise.

In your workbook, complete Question 6.
2. Seeing the Guest’s point of view.

Consider this...
If Mrs Fowles finds hair in her salad, she will be very upset. Imagine how upset you would be if this happened to you! Rather acknowledge the facts of the situation, think of how you would feel if you were in their position and show that you care. You could show empathy by saying: ‘I understand that this must be upsetting for you, Mrs Fowles.’

Top Tips:

- Respect the Guest’s priorities and concerns.
- Use the Guest’s name often. This will show that you care.
- Place yourself in the Guest’s position.
- Use phrases that show you understand the Guest.

What about an angry Guest? Or a very rude Guest? Don’t get angry.

Don’t tell the Guest to calm down. Nothing can make a Guest angrier than being told to ‘calm down’ or ‘relax’.
3.5 Apologise

Consider this...

Wouldn’t it be great if all problems could be handled by simply offering a heartfelt apology? Experience from our Guest Relations team tells us that 38% of complaints can be solved with a simple and heartfelt apology.

1. Why you apologise.

Apologising sincerely to the Guest shows that you acknowledge their complaint and care about their satisfaction.

Don’t get defensive.

This is not the time to protect a point of view at all costs – you are not being attacked. You are simply the receiver of the information that may be valuable for the development of the hotel.

Useful phrases include:

• ‘I’m sorry you did not receive...’
• ‘I’m sorry you had to wait’ or ‘I’m very concerned because you are upset.’

Definition:

Apologising doesn’t mean accepting blame, it means that we understand and acknowledge that the Guest is upset.

2. When you should apologise.

Top Tips:

• Apologies are always necessary when a Guest complains.
• Show that you are genuinely sorry.
• Demonstrate kindness towards the Guest and hotel.
• Stay positive!

3. Being kind to your Guest and your hotel.

When you apologise you have to show the Guest that you are genuinely and honestly sorry that they have been inconvenienced – whether it was your fault or not. This means you have to be kind in your actions and words towards your Guest and your hotel.

When you apologise you should not make excuses for why something happened – for example:

• ‘I am sorry, but I am new to the job.’
You should not point fingers. Be careful not to attribute blame or use phrases such as:

‘I am sorry, the kitchen is working really slowly this evening.’

You should not agree with wrong observations – for example:

‘Yes Mr Higgins, I agree that Fay should be fired.’

When you apologise you should stay positive about your hotel.

‘I’m very sorry about the frustration this has caused and would like to fix this problem for you.’

Apologising has great value even if it does not always solve the problem. It makes your Guest feel better immediately. It also shows that you care and that you own the problem.

Answer Question 7 in your workbook.
3.6 Deliver the Solution Part 1

Once you have identified the problem, listened actively, empathised and apologised, it is time to take action and deliver a solution – quickly.

1. How to deliver the right solution.

Owning the problem means that you need to ensure that a Guest is not passed around from colleague to colleague. To handle problems correctly, it is important that you take responsibility yourself. Don’t get someone else to respond to the Guest for you!

Steps to deliver the right solution to your Guest:

Step 1 – Take action.

Take action immediately. Guests should never be kept waiting.

Step 2 – Finding a solution.

When finding a solution, ask yourself the following questions:

1. Can I fix the problem?
2. Can I offer an alternative?
3. Do I need to compensate the Guest?
4. Do I need to do all three of these things?

The One Hour Goal

If you always strive to handle Guest problems within one hour, it will make you more efficient and make your Guests love your service! You can only reach this one hour goal if you take action quickly.
Step 3 – Gain agreement.
• Find a way of gaining agreement with your Guest.
• Adjust your solutions based on how the Guest reacts to what you suggest.
• Ask some clarifying questions to ensure that you offer the best possible solution.

Step 4 – Resolve the issue!
• Notify the appropriate team members to take action.
• Communicate the urgency of the situation to them.
If you need to investigate the problem before you can handle it, then you need to explain to the Guest:
  a. What you will do to address the situation.
  b. Who you will contact.
  c. When the Guest can expect to hear from you again.

Step 5 – Follow up.
• Go back to your Guest and ask them whether they are happy with how the problem was handled and with the solution that was offered.

To organise the follow-up process, tools for tracking and communicating Guest problems are essential. This is why we have the Problem Tracker.

2. Helpful tool for getting it right.

Definition:
The Service Recovery Matrix helps us understand the severity of each individual problem and find a fair compensation level. It compares the impact of the situation on the Guest to the hotel’s level of responsibility.

Why you should use it:
  a. It will help you learn how to deal with complaints, hereby overcoming your fears of dealing with complaints.
  b. You will feel more confident because you will be able to offer the right solution based on what is right for the hotel and right for the Guest.
  c. It will help to build consistency in your hotel and help you to find your own style of handling problems.
d. It will help you understand when to escalate an issue to your manager. This will help you identify which Guest issues should be resolved with the help of your manager, such as health issues, injuries, allergies or theft, to name a few.

How to use it:

The Service Recovery Matrix consists of four quadrants.

**Quadrant 1:** There is a low impact on the Guest and the level of the hotel’s responsibility is also low.

**Quadrant 2:** There is a high impact on the Guest, but the level of the hotel’s responsibility is low.

**Quadrant 3:** There is a low impact on the Guest, but the level of the hotel’s responsibility is high.

**Quadrant 4:** The impact on the Guest is high and the level of responsibility of the hotel is also high.

Remember, even if the situation is beyond our control and we cannot give the Guest exactly what they want, we should offer them an appropriate alternative or ask them how we can make them feel better.

Never make excuses or blame someone or something else. Always thank Guests for their feedback because their feedback makes our hotel better! Every problem is a gift!

*And remember the two golden rules:*
1. *The Guest is always right.*
2. *If the Guest is not right, reread rule number 1!*

Complete Activity 6 in your workbook.
3.7 Deliver the Solution Part 2

To complete the problem handling process, there are some final things you have to remember.

1. Tracking problems.

As soon as a complaint has occurred, it needs to be recorded in detail on a Problem Tracker so its progress can be tracked. Once it has been resolved, the full details of the resolution, including any compensation provided, also needs to be recorded.

It's really important that the Guest Complaint Tracking Form is completed for each complaint the hotel receives. This way we can follow up with Guests. It also provides useful information about tracking solutions that results in improving Guest satisfaction. This in turn helps your hotel to take the necessary actions to prevent similar problems occurring in the future.

If it is not your job to maintain the Problem Tracker, simply communicate the problem to your supervisor or manager so that they can track it. If your hotel does not use a Problem Tracker, download it from the Problem Resolution Toolkit on Merlin. However, any format for tracking problems can be used.

2. The value of tracking problems.

Tracking problems is a useful way of knowing and ensuring that issues are followed up. Often, your shift is over before you can resolve a problem. By tracking it, you ensure a good handover to the colleague who will be helping your Guest after you.

The Problem Tracker also creates a full history of Guests' complaints and issues that can be referred to at any time in the future.

It also provides information and history for other colleagues who may interact with the Guest during their stay.

For managers, the Problem Tracker is useful, because they can keep track of any recurring problems to find a permanent fix. Fewer problems mean fewer unhappy Guests!

Answer Question 8 in your workbook.
4. Common Scenarios

4.1 Introducing Common Scenarios

Scenarios that show common issues, will help you put everything you have learned into practice. The scenarios can be found in your workbook. Go through the scenarios and complete the activities.

Consider this...

Think of how YOU would have handled these problems in your department. Challenge yourself by thinking about how you would handle the problems that are not applicable to your hotel or your department!

Keep in mind the lessons and the notes you have made, and see if you can decide:

a. In which quadrant of the Service Recovery Matrix the problem falls.

b. Where the ILEAD steps were not followed.

c. Where the one hour goal was not reached.

d. Where problems were not recorded on the Problem Tracker.

Complete Activities 7–22 in your workbook.
5. Concluding Problem Handling

5.1 Conclusion

Congratulations on successfully completing this Problem Handling course!

We have discussed various familiar scenarios and complaints, and there are many more that you can discuss with your colleagues in order to find the best way to deal with them.

We started by introducing problem handling, focussing on understanding the concept, and then we spoke about understanding your emotions and the importance of controlling them.

We then moved on and introduced you to the ILEAD principles and discussed each one in turn, looking at some ‘don'ts’ of problem handling along the way.

In the video lessons and your workbook, we looked at some common scenarios and how to handle them.

To see how you’re doing in terms of problem handling, have a look at the following Problem Handling Milestone Checklist and ask yourself the questions below:

Complete Activity 23 in your workbook.

1. How confident am I in resolving Guest complaints?  
2. What kind of support do I need to help me in the service recovery process?  
3. What are the barriers that are preventing me from performing service recovery efforts?  
4. Can I explain ILEAD?  
5. Would I be able to demonstrate or role play a service recovery process?

The more you practice your problem handling skills, the better you will be able to deliver on our IHG promise of creating and being Great Hotels Guests Love!