



Developing Effective Customer Service Employees through Action Research: A Malaysian Local Authority Experience

Peter Songan^{1*}, Elizabeth Loh¹ and Abang Ehsan Abang Othman¹

¹ Universiti Malaysia Sarawak, 94300 Kota Samarahan, Sarawak, Malaysia

ABSTRACT

Launching a hotline service is just one stage in the process of dealing with customers. Crucial to meeting its objectives is the development of human resources to implement the hotline. This is to ensure that quality and standard are demonstrated in order to justify its existence. This paper presents the findings and reflection of an action research intervention to improve the Hotline Complaint Service of a local authority, the Kuching City South Council in Sarawak, Malaysia. The action research process in this study involved five mini cycles of planning, acting, observing and reflecting. Visits, participant observations, interviews and questionnaires were used in the data collection process. The data were analyzed using content analysis, and the findings validated through triangulation methods. The findings suggest that there was still room for improvement in the Council's Complaint Service. An on-the-job experience for the hotline staff was implemented during which a guideline called the "13 Basic Principles in Effective Telephone Handling"; a "Handbook" on services provided by the Public Cleansing Division; and "Form A" were created and implemented. This study shows that action research is an important component of human resource development interventions that provides employees the opportunity to acquire the knowledge and skills through on-the-job experience to improve their performance and enhance the efficiency and productivity of their organization.

Keywords: Customer service, action research, on-the-job training, local authority

ARTICLE INFO

E-mail address:

songan@unimas.my (Peter Songan)

*Corresponding author

e-ISSN: 2550-1623

© Faculty of Cognitive Sciences and Human Development, Universiti Malaysia Sarawak (UNIMAS)

INTRODUCTION

Once, it was sufficient just to provide a service regardless of whether it was good or not. Times have changed. Now, with greater concern for efficiency, effectiveness and quality, it is not enough just to provide a service, it must be demonstrated with sufficient quality and standard to

justify its continuing existence. Customers today demand high standards of service and will create waves if these are not available. To meet the needs and expectations of the customers, organizations must make adjustments to accommodate them. One way is to provide the customers with avenues to voice their opinions, suggestions and complaints. The opinions, suggestions and complaints received from the customers serve as a basis to improve the products and services rendered, thus, leading to customer satisfaction.

The Kuching City South Council in Sarawak, a local authority in Malaysia has responded to the challenge of meeting customer satisfaction by launching its Hotline Complaint Service. It recognizes deeply that its effectiveness depends on how well it can meet the expectations and needs of the complainants. Satisfaction with its service is mostly influenced by the willingness and the speed the complaint is resolved, the credibility and reliability to perform the promised service and the ease for complainants in making the complaints.

Since the implementation of the Hotline Complaint Service, there has been an increased in complaints among the Council residents. It appears that the objectives of the complaint service are not being met, as there have been requests by local Ministers and residents to improve its services.

How effective is the present hotline in handling the complaints? How can the existing hotline be improved? As there

has been no evaluation yet on the performance of the Hotline Complaint Service since its implementation, this action research attempts to review the hotline service with a view to make it more effective.

THEMATIC CONCERN OF THE STUDY

Kuching City South is located in the state of Sarawak, Malaysia. It covers the area to the east of downtown Kuching and some new areas to the south comprising 61.53 square kilometers. The fast pace of development in the city not only brings along improvement in the economy, better living standards, increased residential housing estates and commercial buildings within the jurisdiction of Kuching City South Council, but also an increase in the amount of domestic, garden and trade wastes. Measures have been taken to rectify the situations occasionally. However, the problem persists, and complaints and grouses are frequently publicized in the press. The issue has become a frequent topic of discussion and hotly debated among the policy makers during the Council's committee meetings. The public through the respective zone representatives/councilors have voiced their deep concern. The councilors have directed that the problem needs to be addressed seriously and solutions found as soon as possible.

In response to the call, the Kuching City South Council launched the Hotline Complaint system on 2 April 1997. This

service is to facilitate communication with members of the public and ratepayers on matters relating to the Council's services. The complaints, suggestions and comments from the public and ratepayers would enable the Council to improve and/or rectify its services, thereby improving its efficiency. With this, the Council hopes to achieve a higher standard of service and increase its list of services to the public and ratepayers.

The Hotline came under the jurisdiction of the Quality and Public Relations (Q and PR) unit in the Council, where the Council Mayor and Council Secretary sit in as advisors. Three personnel man the service. They are to key into the computer all details pertaining to the complaint(s) received, such as, the nature of the complaint, the location of the complaint, name, address and telephone contact of the complainant. The system software is programmed and written in such a manner that the complaint reference number is automatically recorded. The personnel only needs to key in the particulars under the box provided and press the respective codes, namely: ADM (administration), PCD (Public Cleansing Department), PH (Public Health), BAL (Building and Landscaping), ENG (Engineering), RAV (Rating and Valuation) and ENF (Enforcement). The complaint is retrievable at the respective Divisions. The divisional staff would enter and provide the necessary feedback into the computer on their side once action is taken.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

More specifically, the objectives of the study are to:

- determine the Council's present level of performance in terms of handling complaints;
- determine the awareness and knowledge of the staff regarding the hotline and customer satisfaction;
- identify the problems and causes that deter the staff from being effective in handling the hotline;
- identify ways to improve the hotline and the personnel handling the hotline;
- implement ways to improve the hotline and developing the staff handling the hotline; and
- evaluate the proposed actions taken to improve the hotline and the staff handling the hotline.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Customer Service

Edvardsson, Thomasson and Ovretveit (1994) advanced the existence of an organization and business as a result of customers. Without customers, there is no business. The rationale is that there must be an all-encompassing and genuine service culture in the organization.

Customer service is about perceptions, a subjective and intangible personal experience (Cook, 1992). The perception of the service the customers receive is dependent on their expectations. If the treatment that the customers receive is better than their expectation, this is good service.

Another aspect of service that customers expect is quality. The customer is the sole arbiter of quality. While receiving and welcoming complaints from the customers, the organization must ensure that the customers' needs and wants are met accordingly. Quality reflects customer satisfaction. Customer satisfaction involves not only assuring the quality of the product or service provided but also meeting the consumer needs as an individual (Kearney & Bandle, 1990).

One popular way for the customers to communicate their needs and expectations is through a customer service line. It provides an avenue for the customers to give their suggestions and opinions to improve and enhance the services and products of the organization. Customer service serves as a tool to answer customer's questions and complaints, thus, enables the organization to identify and meet the superior needs of the customers (Lytle, 1993).

LeBoeuf (1987) and Walker (1990) highlighted three basic advantages of customer complaints, namely:

1. Complaints serve as feedback to identify weak spots and areas that need corrective action.
2. Complaints give the organization a second chance to provide better or improved services to dis-satisfied customers.
3. Complaints are a wonderful opportunity to strengthen customer loyalty.

Even being aware of these advantages may not be enough to ensure sustainabil-

ity and survival of the organization. Organizations must provide effective complaints handling system to resolve customers' problems. One could have the best complaint system but if the actions taken were not prompt in the customers' eyes, then it would still be a failure. Unresolved complaints create tension in the organization and waste everybody's time (Williams, 1996).

There are cases, where customers, rarely complain unless they are being asked (Hinton & Schaeffer, 1994). There are also instances when people do not complain even after bad experience with a product or service provided. These are the group of people who would prefer to bad mouth their bad experiences to friends, relatives, peers and competitors, especially in the business organization. But if the personnel handling the complaint service are customer-friendly and responsive, then the customers are not threatened to call and put in their suggestions, opinions and complaints.

The importance of well written, well-communicated, quality customer policies, standards and procedures in order to bring service excellence must be recognized by organizations (IDS, 1995). Another area that organizations need to focus on is employees' training. Consumers in a survey stressed that employees' skills, such as, courtesy, attitude and helpfulness were important in distinguishing quality of service delivered (Fahmia Huda, 1995). Garcia (1992), who stressed that knowledgeable and well-trained employees were more likely to resolve the question or problem to the

customers' satisfaction further supports this.

Action Research

Action research was introduced by Kurt Lewin (1946) "as a way of generating knowledge about a social system," (Hart & Bond, 1987, p. 13), as well as, a means of trying to change the system. Lewin did not provide a definition of action research. His methodology involved systematic steps of planning, acting, observing and reflecting.

The literature is filled with a variety of definitions of action research ranging from how it is done to why it is done. Bunning (1995) defines it as an essentially self-managed process of collaborative and rigorous enquiry, action, reflection which, through a series of cycles of these activities, it is intended to improve the situation being addressed and, at the same time, develop the skills and insights of the individuals doing it.

According to Cunningham (1993), action research is a term used to describe a wide range of activities that focus on research, theorizing, learning, and development. There must exist a real problem in the organization and the role of the researcher is to be engaged in a real-life problem solving. It is undertaken by organization members or action research group. It emphasizes member's participation in both research and action and stresses on group dynamics and social forces that enhance or inhibit group action.

Altricher, Kemmis and Zuber-Skeritt (1990) also associate action research to organization or work-based problems and the involvement of groups in the problem-solving process. Group members are to work collaboratively with the facilitator to address problems that are of common concern to the group. Kemmis and MacTaggart (1988) termed this "problem" as the thematic concern that warrants action research methods. The thematic concerns are issues or problems that are generally shared by a group. The group describes their concern, explores what others think and probes to find out what might possibly be done. It focuses on an area where substantive improvements are needed. Group members are to plan together, act and observe individually or collectively and reflect together.

Burns (1997) views the thematic concern as specific problem in a defined context. Action research looks and takes upon the process in total, starting with diagnosing, preparing remedial action plan, implementing and monitoring of its effects. In essence, it is the application of fact-finding to practical problem solving in a social situation with a view to improving the quality of action with it.

From the above definitions, the common issues that most writers associate action research with are:

1. it must be problem-focused (problem is termed as "thematic concern"); and
2. the concern must be shared by the group within the organization and that the group is to work together to address and resolve the problem in a

collaborative way involving the spiral steps of planning, action, observation and reflection.

Burns (1997, p. 347) outlined four characteristics of action research as follows:

1. situational, diagnosing problem in a specific context and attempts to solve it in the context;
2. collaborative, with teams of researchers and practitioners working together;
3. participative, as team members take part directly in implementing the research; and
4. self-evaluative, modifications are continuously evaluated within the ongoing situation to improve.

Abraham, Arnold, and Oxenberry (1996) cited similar characteristics of Lewin's action research but included the notion of spiral action, which is a part of a spiral of steps comprised of planning and evaluation. It is spiral in action because it consists of activities to plan, to act and observe and to reflect (Kemmis & McTaggart, 1988).

ACTION RESEARCH AS USED IN THIS STUDY

The use of action research as a research methodology is a new approach as far as customer service is concerned. The action research methodology which was adapted in this study involved the process of orientation and formation of action research group and a series of five mini-cycles of planning, action, observa-

tion, reflection, evaluation and implementation.

Below is the description of the action research methodology used in this study, showing the activities of the action research cycle within a series of five mini cycles and processes:

Planning

The planning phase of the study included our entry into the organization, formation of the action research group and orientation to the action research process.

In order to gain support and approval from the management with regards to the study, we briefed both the Council Mayor and City Secretary on the research topics, research questions, methodology used, and our schedule in the workplace. The benefits derived from the study and the need to form the action research group comprising of people from the organization were also discussed. The action research group was formed to assist us in executing the various stages of the action research steps of planning, acting, observing and reflecting. The action research group comprised of seven people from various divisions within the Council. We selected our members based on the following criteria: a) concern for the project; b) experience with the problem; and c) commitment to solve the problem. Once the action research members agreed to the invitation, letters of appointment were issued. Soon afterward, we conducted our first familiarization meeting with them. They were introduced to

action research and the basic knowledge of customer service and customer satisfaction. Other topics that were discussed with them included research ethics, standards and expectations, roles of facilitator, action plan, time frame of the project and the like.

Acting

This is the stage where we implemented the plan that we discussed during the previous meeting. The plan included formulation of the questionnaire, gathering of data from the target groups and implementation of actions based on the data gathered.

The questionnaire (both open-ended and guided), which we formulated included items on the hotline staff's attitudes and behaviors towards the complainants, and knowledge about the hotline and some issues and concerns related to scavenging services. Also, a section where complainants were asked to give suggestions to improve the hotline service was included. It was decided that the questionnaire be administered to the target group by telephone interview. The target group of which the questionnaire was administered comprised of 14 complainants from the Borneo Development Corporation (BDC) Housing Estate.

For the staff, we used face to face interview using the questionnaire formulated by the action research group. The target group comprised of 18 divisional heads, 3 hotline staff, 8 staff monitoring the hotline complaints in the respective division and 5 field staff assigned to the

BDC area. While interviewing the staff, we made observations of the respondents' attitudes and behaviors.

In addition, we made visits and observations to some organizations with hotline complaint system. They were the Department of Environment (DOE), Kuching City North Council, Talikhidmat and 991. We also asked questions relating to the implementation of their hotline complaint system as we hoped to learn from their experience.

Based on the interviews done, we discovered that the present hotline service would be more effective if the officers manning the hotline were equipped with the communication knowledge and skills. In view of this, we decided to proceed by carrying out an on-the-job training for these officers.

Observation

Direct observation was done simultaneously during the planning and acting stages of the cycle. We observed and monitored the reaction and development of the members during the action research group meetings and discussions. The members' facial expressions, gestures and body movements could indicate their interest, attention given and commitments to the meetings. The comments, opinions, consensus and disagreement could show the members' participation, group dynamics and cohesiveness. These observations enabled us to modify and readdress the issues. Direct observation was complimented with video recordings during data analysis,

cassette tape recordings on two separate occasions, recordings in respective members' diaries, letters and handouts.

During face to face interviews, members recorded the reactions of the respondents. While recording the verbal responses of the respondents, the members took into account the validity of the responses, whether there was truthfulness or uncertainty in the reply and/or whether the respondent was agitated.

Direct observations on the trainees (hotline personnel, operators and staff handling the hotline at PCD) were made by the action research group members during briefing and throughout their training. Subsequent observations were also made on the same people after the training while they were performing their tasks to see whether there was any improvement. The 13 basic principles served as the checklist during observations. In addition, evaluation forms were passed to the trainees to evaluate the usefulness of the 13 basic principles and the handbook

Reflection and Evaluation

Together as an action research group, we reflected to identify problems we faced during data collection, so we could re-plan our actions. Whenever new issues arose and identified, we promptly addressed them. The data we collected were evaluated and reflected on to check for validity. Besides group reflection, each of us reflected on the learning experience as we went through the processes in the action research cycle. Self-reflection enabled us to recollect the

experiences while doing the research and identify our strengths and weaknesses. Self-reflection turned out to be an effective learning tool for everyone.

We carried out a final evaluation on the effectiveness of the guideline, 13 Basic Principles, Form A and the record book. Thereupon, we gave a copy of the final report to the Council Mayor and City Secretary for their comments and advice.

Justification of the Use of Action Research in the Study

In view of the nature of this study, we decided that action research was the most appropriate method to use for the following reasons:

1. Action research is problem-focused and is concerned with real life situations. Improving "Quality Service" and "Customer Satisfaction" were the identified thematic concerns in the Council. Action research enabled us to explore ways to improve the service image of the Council.
2. A cyclical process of the action research method involving five cycles of planning, action, observation and reflection was ideal in determining the current standards and practices of the hotline and generating effective ideas aimed at providing better services to the customer.
3. The collaborative nature of action research method provided an environment that allowed significant interaction and group dynamics in reviewing the hotline service. This facilitated identifying the weaknesses faced in carrying out the hotline ser-

- vice through questioning, interviews, observations and looking at other practices elsewhere. It has also provided for mutual reflection on effective customer service and customer satisfaction instead of neglecting and taking a “could not care less” attitude.
4. Prior approval was obtained from the Council Mayor and Council Secretary. We also sought approval from the action research group members to include them in the study. To ensure the validity and accuracy of the data as well as the use of a tape recorder during the interviews, we obtained prior permission from the interviewees. To ensure that the study was conducted smoothly and ethically, constant consultations and approval from the top management and senior officers were obtained.
 5. The action research group members, management, senior officers and staff became more aware of customer needs, customer service and customer satisfaction. The public’s requests for better service were also looked into effectively.
 6. Part of the findings of the study was implemented in the Council and changes resulting from the implementation constituted an improvement to the practices of the organization. As a result of the on-the-job training, 13 Basic Principles in Effective Telephone Handling and a Handbook on PCD’s services were created and implemented. To improve the complaint tracking system and the effective handling of the complaints, ‘Form A’ was created and implemented.
 7. The exploratory nature of the study enabled us to use possible ways and alternatives to address the problems and issues in the implementation of the hotline service. We have effectively used direct observations on our action research group members during our meetings, interviews, causal interactions and visits to organizations with hotline systems. We used the methods of triangulation and content analysis to check the consistency of the findings from different observers, methods of observation, times, places and research situations.
 8. Reeducation occurred during the study with learning by the action research group members through teamwork and practical experience in developing self-confidence, self-esteem, public speaking skills, sense of commitment, decision making and problem solving skills. The knowledge base of the whole organization was improved and we gained knowledge about the culture of the research group and developed a greater understanding of the nature of the action research process.
 9. The infusion and prevalence of the learning process through reflection in the action research spiral cycles improved our knowledge and skills, as members of the action research group.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This study was conducted at the administrative headquarters of Kuching City South Council. It aimed to review the current practice of the Council's Hotline Complaint Service and bring about improvements in the customer service of the Council. The following are the findings of the action research study and they are discussed according to the objectives listed.

Council's Performance in Complaint Handling

Twenty-one of the staff interviewed were of the opinion that the implementation of the hotline was good. While it is one way of getting feedback on the performance and quality of Council's services, it also shows the concern the Council has for its customers. The staff also agreed that in order to provide an effective hotline, the complaints of the customers must be looked into promptly and thoroughly.

The findings however showed that it still took the Council on average, a few days to look into a particular complaint. One complainant remarked that their domestic refuse was collected two days after their complaints were made. They added that if the domestic refuse such as leftover foods, prawns and fish heads were not collected immediately, they would attract flies and rodents, causing harm to human health.

The scavenging workers are the representatives of the Council on the ground.

They must be educated and trained to provide the best possible services to the customers. They must maintain a pleasant personality, be hardworking and willing to help the customers at all time. Three of the complainants commented on the way scavenging workers did their jobs. According to them, the scavenging workers must be very careful when collecting the rubbish. They should ensure that rubbish was not littered or scattered onto the ground. They should also be considerate by not dragging the bins around which could create unnecessary loud and unpleasant sound, and also could damage the bins.

The survey also showed all the fourteen complainants were glad that the hotline personnel were informative, knowledgeable and concerned about the complainant's problem. However, three of the complainants commented that the hotline personnel were unfriendly and impolite when they called in. One complainant commented that it took a while before his call was answered.

Giving feedback on the complaint is one way of determining whether the Council has looked into the complaints effectively and promptly and in meeting customer's expectations and needs. Thus, it should be prompt. The positive word of mouth from the customers as a result of experiencing good services from the Council would make her reputable and a proud department of the State Civil Service. However, the findings showed that the feedback given by the hotline staff had been very irregular. Only five of the

complainants received feedback on their complaints from the hotline personnel.

With regards to immediate feedback and channeling of the complaints to the respective divisions, all the three personnel took less than half a day to key in the complaints. The delay on their part would mean delay of the required action to be taken by the divisional staff. The staff also said that a lot of the complaint particulars received from the hotline personnel were either misleading or insufficient with respect to the nature, location of the complaint and the personal particulars of the complainant. As a result, the field staff had a hard time locating the place of complaint. There were cases when the telephone numbers and addresses given by the hotline personnel were wrong, leading to the difficulty in contacting the complainants. This indicates the lack of skills on the part of the hotline personnel. They must be made to realize the importance of getting the full and detailed particulars of the complainants and the complaints so that there would be no misleading or insufficient information that would prevent and/or deter the divisional staff from taking the required action speedily.

Three of the eight staff coordinating and receiving the complaints at the divisional level commented that they would only check and monitor the complaints from the computer whenever it was necessary and when they were free. In terms of the priority placed on the hotline complaints, four of the staff said that they would check twice daily while one would check hourly. To be effective, there must be

continuous monitoring and constant monitoring of the complaints on the computer. Any delay in retrieving the complaint would delay the action taken by the field staff and thus would lose the confidence of the customers.

Findings from the survey on the divisional heads revealed that all the measures taken to rectify the complaints were reactive and short-term in nature. Steps must be taken to prevent further recurrence of the complaints and with immediate feedback from the complainants; the divisional heads must come up with immediate long term measures to address this strategically.

Six of the twenty-four staff interviewed suggested that divisional heads must coordinate and cooperate with one another so that any assistance that is required in the course of rectifying the situation would not be delayed. The field staff upon taking action must report back at once to the division so that this can be relayed to the hotline staff who in return would inform the complainants that action had been taken. Findings from the survey on the five-field staff showed that it took them an average of 1-3 days to report back on the action taken.

Knowledge and Skills of the Staff

In order to provide an effective hotline service, it is important for the staff to know its function, the implications and ways to provide it effectively. It is equally important for the staff to understand that the services provided must

meet the customer's expectations. Only when they are aware of this and with a positive mindset and attitude are they able to provide the service effectively and efficiently to achieve total customer satisfaction.

Based on the survey, most of the staff were still unclear of the actual functions of the Council's hotline despite its existence since April 1997. Only 7 out of the 24 staff surveyed were correct when they commented that the Council's hotline was for receiving complaints and inquiries from the public on its services. Sixteen of them correctly defined customer satisfaction as services meeting customers' expectations.

Deterrents to Effective Handling of the Hotline

In view that the hotline unit was new and the personnel had no training, the new duties and responsibilities assigned to them were considered heavy. When asked what problems, they faced in carrying out their work, their responses were:

- a) misleading and insufficient particulars of complainant;
- b) wrongly channeled hotline complaint;
- c) lack of communication skill;
- d) lack of general knowledge;
- e) no training on computer usage;
- f) weak command of language and common dialects; and
- g) staff in particular division were not willing to handle the job and pass it to other division

Ways to Improve the Hotline Service and the Staff

Based on the findings, it can be concluded that there was still room for improvement in the service. To improve the hotline system and make it more effective, there must exist total commitment from everyone within the organization. The following were the suggestions given by the staff on how to improve the hotline service:

a) Formulate service vision and mission

The service vision and mission should take into consideration the customers' needs and expectations that run concurrently with the overall vision and mission and objectives of the Council. It has to be well communicated and understood by the staff to create customer service awareness leading towards effective service performance.

b) Provide training to the staff

The training must include basic knowledge about the organization, customer-handling skills such as problem solving, giving clarifications, summarizing, and dealing with difficult people. It is also important for the staff to learn how to be polite, courteous, caring and assertive.

c) Specific standards and measurement of performance

A set of standard must be agreed to by the staff and the management and be known to everybody. There must be constant monitoring and evaluating

against the standards to achieve continuous service improvements. Achievable targets once agreed upon should be written and reviewed at least once half yearly and problems faced during implementation should be immediately looked into.

d) Reward and recognition

Service improvements need to be rewarded and recognized. Examples of reward and recognition that were suggested are additional training, educational or study tours, plaques, lunches, dinners, complimentary letters and visits from top management, pictures and articles in the newsletter, new work assignment, trophies, office equipment and furnishings.

e) Review and update work processes and procedures

Proper records on complaints and complaint handling must be recorded, audited and updated to improve the system and service. The work specifics would ensure the right personnel with right skills and knowledge is retained on the job.

f) Launching service program

To ensure continuous staff involvement, launching of the program, exhibitions and dialogue sessions with public were suggested. There should also be regular publicity through the mass media, pamphlets, brochures, public notice board and display of the number on Council's vehicles and public transports so that the public would be aware of the hotlines service and be encouraged to call in.

g) Customer survey

It should be a regular practice of the organization aimed at discovering the customers' needs and expectations. It would put the Council on its guard and move towards continuous upgrading and improving of the services.

h) Other service commitments

To enhance its customer service, the Council should plan to extend the operating hours of the hotline to a 24-hour service for the convenience of the customers. A task force must be put on standby to look into the any customer problems and complaints even after office hours. For public convenience, the Council should also consider providing a toll-free line to encourage more people to call in.

Result of the On-the-Job Training

During the on-the-job training, a guideline named 13 Basic Principles in Effective Telephone Handling was compiled by the operators, hotline and frontline staff of the Public Cleansing Division. In addition to this, a check and monitor form known as Form A was created. The purpose of which was not only to check and balance but also to track the movement and trace the completion of the tasks and the time taken to complete them. Reasons as to why complaints could not be dealt with were also recorded. To assist the staff in implementing the form effectively, a briefing together with a written guideline was given. Also, a record book was also created for the Public Cleansing Division (PCD) as an additional document to check and

monitor the completion of the complaints at the division.

It was found that with the creation of the Form A and the record book, the role and responsibility of each and everyone together with the work standards set became clear. A handbook was compiled and created upon the request of the clerks and operators to further enhance their performance. The handbook provided the staff additional information in terms of activities and services available of the Public Cleansing Division. This ensured that they were in a position to handle inquiries while at the same time providing an/or obtaining more information whenever there was a complaint. The information in the handbook included scavenging areas/zones covered by the Council, the privatized zone by the Council's contractors, the collection schedules and additional scavenging rates. Others included the desludging services and the chargeable rates, recycling programs, dog catching, road sweeping and drain clearing.

Lessons Learnt and Gained by the Action Research Group Members

The study started off with eight research members who had no knowledge about research, action research and action learning. As the group underwent the process of action research and action learning, positive changes in their attitudes and practices personally and professionally were noticed. Group dynamics and teamwork were developed among the members. They showed a sense of commitment and participation towards

achieving the set goals of the study. They have become more appreciative of themselves and their contribution in bringing about improvement to the organization. They have acknowledged the importance and value of customer service and customer satisfaction and had pledged to continue to work towards attaining them. Most of them admitted that their public speaking skills, self-confidence and self-esteem have improved. They have become more receptive in accepting challenges and new ideas in their everyday practice. They admitted that they learned to be more patient, understanding and sensitive to others. These self-reported developments were further substantiated by the weight they had given to each of the experiences before and after action research on a scale of 1 to 10. An average score (after AR score – before AR score) of all the seven members were taken where scores of more than 2 were considered to be highly significant. Among these are the overall increase in teamwork, confidence, self-esteem, public speaking skill and sense of independence. The other items are more participation, ability to set goals and share knowledge, more effective planning, and more analytical, confident and able to tackle a problem, able to counsel and motivate others. Overall, there was a sense of achievement and satisfaction on the part of the action research group members.

CONCLUSION

There is an increasing concern to improve customer service to meet the ever-

changing needs and expectation of the customers. This study was done to review the hotline complaint service with a view of making it more effective. It determined the level of performance of the Council in handling the hotline and identified problems that deterred the staff from effective handling of complaints. In the course of doing so, suggestions for improvements and implementations were carried out to improve and upgrade the hotline and the staff handling the hotline. These were all done by action research.

Action research methodology was adapted in this study because it benefited not only the action research team but also the organization. Some of the benefits gained were: 1) it provided an immense range of learning opportunities for the members of the action research group and the organization; 2) the action research group members were able to question, suggest, share experiences which led to increased self-confidence, self-esteem and communication skills; and 3) the action research group members were able to work as a team and positively influenced their colleagues resulting in improvements in their work performance.

Based on the findings of the study, the success of the complaint service depended on the people who were given the responsibility to man it. Training the customer service employees is important to ensure that they are equipped with the right skills and knowledge to handle the customers' complaints.

REFERENCES

- Altricher, H., Kemmis, S., McTaggart, R., & Zuber-Skeritt, O. (1990). Defining, confirming or refining action research. In O. Zuber-Skeritt (Ed.), *Action research for change and development*. Brisbane: CALT, Griffith University.
- Abraham, S., Arnold, G., & Oxenbeery, R. (1996). *The self-discovering organisation: Fusing action research to the learning organisation*. Paper presented at a conference on "Building a Learning Organisation through Action Learning and Action Research," Singapore, 25-26 October 1996.
- Bunning, C. (1994). *Action research: An emerging paradigm*. Brisbane: The Tertiary Education Institute.
- Burns, R. B. (1997). *Introduction to research method*. Melbourne: Longman Publisher.
- Cunningham, J. B. (1993). *Action research and organisational development*. London: Praeger Publisher.
- Cook, S. (1992). *Customer care: Implementing total quality in today's service driven organisation*. London: Kogan Page Ltd.
- Edvardsson, B., Thomasson, B., & Overtveit, J. (1994). *Quality of service: Making it really work*. Berkshire: McGraw Hill Book Co.
- Fahim Huda. (1995). Service quality management in residential and nursing care homes. *The Total Quality Management Magazine*, 7 (6), pp. 43-51.

- Garcia, L. (1992). A 1992 profile of 800 numbers of customer service. *SOCAP 800 Number Study*, pp. 1-22.
- Hart, E., & Bond, M. (1987). *Action research for health and social care*. Birmingham: Open University Press.
- Hinton, T., & Schaeffer, W. (1994). *Customer focused quality: What to do on Monday morning*. New Jersey: Prentice Hall.
- IDS. (1995). The customer is always right. *IDS Study*, pp. 1-20.
- Kearney, E. J., & Bandle, M. J. (1990). *Everyone's a customer*. Kuala Lumpur: Golden Books Centre Sdn. Bhd.
- Kemmis, S., & McTaggart, R. (1988). *The action research planner*. (3rd ed.). Melbourne: Deakin University Publisher.
- LeBoeuf, M. (1987). *How to win customers and keep and keep them for life*. London: Piatkus Publishers.
- Lewin, K. (1946). Action research and minority problems, in G.W. Lewin (Ed.) *Resolving Social Conflicts*. New York: Harper & Row (1948).
- Lytle, J. F. (1993). *What do your customers really want? Here's a sure way to find out*. Kuala Lumpur: Golden Books Centre Sdn. Bhd.
- Walker, D. (1990). *A strategy for quality service*. Hants: Gower Publishing Co. Ltd.
- Williams, T. (1996). *Dealing with customer complaint*. Hampshire: Gower Publishing Co. Ltd.