



Suggestion boxes

Description

Consumers are invited to write down their suggestions for improvements as well as compliments, complaints and concerns on paper and place them in a box that is located in a common area. The organisation publicly responds to the feedback received.

How it works

The presence of the suggestion box is advertised (e.g. with signs, posters, article in newsletter) and staff encourage consumers to use the box, especially to report any negative experiences they might have had of the service.

Feedback, suggestions and responses to them are made public to all consumers, for example with written responses placed on a display board in the common area. This may stimulate further discussion and action on the issues raised.

A working group of staff and consumers may be formed to consider the feedback received and to provide advice and suggestions about how the organisation can respond to negative feedback and complaints.

Suggestion boxes are most effective when:

- They are placed in a position where people have the time and facilities to write their suggestions.
- There is a focus or issue for suggestions. This can change on a regular basis and there can be a display near the box explaining the importance of the issue, information about it and what the organisation needs to know from consumers.
- Printed forms are available for consumers to use to make suggestions, with an invitation for them to provide contact details so staff can follow up the suggestion or complaint with them.
- They are not used as the only method for getting consumer input, but are part of a wider consultation plan with multiple strategies.

Degree of participation

Information seeking.

Timeframe

Short term / ongoing.

Resource level required

Low.

Staff time and organisational procedures are needed to monitor and report suggestions, consider and respond to them. Procedures should allocate responsibility for these steps. Printed forms and displays should be provided and maintained.

Strengths

Suggestion boxes, like regular consumer meetings, are familiar to consumers and staff of housing and homelessness services. They are low cost and require relatively little staff time once they are in place.

Suggestion boxes are easy to implement and may just require small adjustments to become a useful tool in the CP toolkit.

For consumers, suggestion boxes can be fairly anonymous. They can be an easily accessible and non-confrontational method of providing feedback, especially at services where consumers regularly visit the office.

Weaknesses

In some services, consumers are most likely to have time on their hands to write a suggestion while waiting for the service, rather than afterwards when they may have something more to say about service quality.

Suggestion boxes are less accessible for consumers who lack good literacy skills or the confidence to put pen to paper. They are also less suitable for services that are primarily outreach-based.

Suggestion boxes can tend to be a one-way method of communication. To help start a dialogue, suggestions and responses to feedback can be displayed near the box for all to see. Consumers can be encouraged to leave contact details but this negates the anonymity of the mechanism.



Example

One accommodation service has a suggestion box that tends to receive the "same old complaints" about the food and about the behaviour of other people's children:

"When we clean it out all we get are the same old complaints, kid's drawings and some lolly wrappers! What can we do?"

Consumers suggested a display around the suggestion box, with the complaints, drawings and wrappers and some comments from the organisation in response, along with an invitation for consumers to continue to participate. However, this mechanism needs to be part of a bigger participation strategy.

Tips

- ☞ Suggestion boxes are best treated as a simple starting point and a minor consumer participation accessory, not as a main strategy.
- ☞ People with the energy to complain may have the energy to be active consumers in your participation strategy. Consider how to engage them in other CP processes.
- ☞ As an alternative or additional strategy, try a “virtual” suggestion box using an organisational feedback email address. Advertise the address on posters, brochures and in newsletters. Designate a staff member responsible for regularly checking the inbox and seeing that feedback is followed up and replied to where appropriate.

For more information...

- <http://www.participateinhealth.org.au/clearinghouse/#1>. “IMPROVING HEALTH SERVICES THROUGH CONSUMER PARTICIPATION: A RESOURCE GUIDE FOR ORGANISATIONS”. p.47. Viewed November 2007.