

# Composure in Customer Service

With the government's rail reform push for better customer service and passenger value, what might this mean for customer conflict? And how can we better equip our people? The OPC's Psychologist **Laura Hedley** shares some insights



**T**he government's renewed focus on the railway sector promises passengers more reliable, high-quality services as part of its 'Plan for Change' agenda. This means operators are under greater pressure and accountability to enhance efficiency and improve passenger experience to help support economic growth targets. The Transport Secretary recently reinforced this commitment, stating: 'The government is determined to drive up performance and put passengers first' setting a clear mandate for excellence in service.

## Embedding a Culture of Excellence

As expert Occupational Psychologists specialising in human factors, workplace dynamics, and Non-Technical Skills (NTS), we have decades of experience supporting rail operators in delivering exceptional customer service and managing passenger conflict. Through research, tailored development programs, and assessment tools from OPC Assessment, we help

frontline staff provide outstanding 'Silver Service' that leaves a positive impression.

## Understanding Passenger Priorities

Regardless of whether they are commuters, occasional travellers, or holidaymakers, rail passengers share common priorities at key points in their journey.

- **At the ticket office** – they expect short queues, ease in purchasing the correct ticket at the best value fare, with enough time to reach their train.
- **On the concourse** – clear travel information, timely updates and platform announcements ensure a smooth boarding process.
- **Onboard** – cleanliness, seat availability, and comfort are important. Clear and reassuring communications during any delays will impact their overall customer experience.

Ultimately, great customer service is about making passengers feel valued, supported, and cared for in their journey. 'Great

customer care relies on key qualities' says Laura Hedley, Head of Consultancy and Talent Services at the OPC. 'Our Customer Care representatives must respond swiftly and empathically, ensuring every passenger feels heard. Problem-solving, a strong understanding of delays, network routes and connections, and efficient service are all highly valued by customers.'

By anticipating needs, we can prevent disappointment. Ultimately, passengers want to feel understood, valued, and confident that their journey is in good hands – knowing we've pushed the extra mile to deliver quality customer service.'

## OPC Research – what makes customers feel valued?

What makes a customer feel valued in a face-to-face interaction? Is it friendliness, eye contact, or simply an efficient transaction? To explore this, OPC psychologists worked alongside a UK train operator to research customer service at a busy London terminal.

They interviewed over one hundred and sixty customers immediately after purchasing train tickets, asking about their experience. They covered everything from the agent's appearance to whether they received a warm farewell. One crucial question was whether the interaction left them feeling 'special,' revealing the small but impactful behaviours that can shape a customer's lasting impressions.

The study results highlighted three key behaviours:

1. A warm greeting with a smile.
2. A sincere 'thank you' at the end of the transaction.
3. A pleasant parting comment.

These simple actions significantly influenced how customers felt about their service experience. First and last impressions matter most – setting the right tone at the start and leaving a lasting positive impression at the end.

## WORDS TO DESCRIBE FEELINGS WHEN FACED WITH INTERPERSONAL CONFLICT



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Laura Hedley reflected: 'Making customers feel valued doesn't require grand gestures. Small, thoughtful interactions can transform a routine service into a standout experience – something that can be applied to all customer interactions.'

In contrast, customer care isn't always easy to deliver when there are delays or unexpected issues, and rail employees may have to deal with customer conflict on a daily basis.

### Interpersonal Conflict and Railway Staff

At a seminar led by Laura Hedley, they asked nearly one hundred managers and leaders to describe common feelings they experienced when facing interpersonal conflict. E.g., frustration, anxiety etc.

Laura reflected: 'Dealing with interpersonal conflict is tough regardless of where you sit in an organisation, even senior leaders aren't immune to the effects of interpersonal conflict or an angry and disappointed passenger whose travel arrangements have been disrupted.'

### The Impact of Interpersonal Conflict

Frequent conflict can harm employee well-being, increase absenteeism by up to six per cent, and raise healthcare costs by up to 50 per cent for these individuals. Those regularly exposed to conflict are also at greater risk of workplace accidents, especially when it occurs for 25–50 per cent of their day.

Beyond individuals, workplace conflict carries significant organisational consequences. It can drive staff turnover, impacting on recruitment and training costs while damaging the organisation's reputation. Negative customer experiences lower passenger satisfaction and may impact revenue. Additionally, it can also contribute to more errors, accidents, along with potential safety incidents, making conflict resolution a crucial business priority.

Laura shared an example highlighting some tension points: 'Holding passengers on the concourse for just five minutes can heighten anxiety, increase passenger frustration, and create more opportunities

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for conflict. Once a platform number is released, staff must manage crowd control, de-escalate tensions, and maintain safety—adding pressure that can affect job satisfaction, performance, and their well-being.'

### Defining Great Customer Care

Effective conflict management starts with a warm, friendly greeting to set a positive tone. Recognising inappropriate behaviour early can allow for a timely intervention, like stepping in to help a frustrated customer at a ticket machine. In challenging situations, staying calm, thinking clearly, and using empathic language can help de-escalate conflict, while a confrontational approach may often worsens it.

Great customer care means being open, supportive, and ensuring customers feel valued and heard. Dismissing and challenging concerns can often heighten tensions. Knowing when to seek support or involve others shows good problem-solving skills, while failing to do so can leave issues unresolved and customers dissatisfied.

### Why some people manage interpersonal conflict better

An employee's ability to manage interpersonal conflict can be influenced by four key factors:

#### 1. Personal Behaviours and Non-Technical Skills (NTS)

Some individuals naturally manage conflict well due to their underlying abilities e.g., strong emotional regulation and composure, resilience, and a commitment to excellent service. They remain calm under pressure and can de-escalate tense situations effectively. In contrast, others with lower emotional control, may react defensively, making conflict resolution more challenging.

#### 2. Situational and Experience-Based Factors

Frontline employees develop conflict management skills through structured training, and real-world experience, ensuring they are well-equipped to deliver excellent service.

Key elements include:

- **Induction Training** – building core skills in conflict management and communication techniques from the outset ensures a consistent standard of service.
- **Ongoing Professional Development** – regular refresher training, scenario-





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based learning, and role-playing exercises can reinforce best practice and build confidence. Exposure to common and a variety of more challenging customer interactions helps employees to refine their approach. Outstanding Customer Service employees often learn from experience, whether by observing skilled colleagues or navigating difficult situations themselves. Ongoing development can also support teams to manage new, emerging customer service challenges that arise.

- **Shared Learning** – reviewing real-life incidents (both positive and more challenging incidents) allows teams to learn from experience and continuously improve. As Laura noted: ‘Customer service is no different to safety performance management – we should learn from everyday examples, take the key insights, and share them across teams.’

### 3. Job Design and Organisational Support

Well-defined roles with clear expectations, escalation processes, and structured support systems empower employees to manage interpersonal conflict effectively. When employees understand their role scope and authority, they experience less stress and can act more decisively.

Key organisational strategies include:

- **NTS profiling** – alongside technical requirements, NTS role profiling ensures key competencies are embedded from the start while also guiding targeted training and development to enhance performance.
- **Providing the Right Tools** – equipping people with radios, body cameras, and avoiding solo working during high-risk times build confidence and resilience.
- **Task Adaptation** – adjusting roles to help minimise opportunities where interpersonal conflict can occur. E.g., Avoiding ticket inspections or issuing fines during major delays or train overcrowding, helps protect Train Managers



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from enforcing rules that may escalate passenger tensions.

- **Supportive Work Environment** – strong team dynamics and engaged, supportive management play a crucial role in maintaining the well-being of customer-facing staff who regularly handle challenging situations.

### 4. Recruitment and Selection

Selecting the right candidates with the key skills is crucial for maintaining high standards in customer service. OPC Assessment provides a wide range of tools to identify the Non-Technical Skills (NTS) needed for successful performance, and dealing with customer conflict.


- **The Customer Service Personality Questionnaire (CSPQ)** – evaluates key personality traits like customer focus, resilience and working with people.
- **Customer Service Situations (CSS)** – a situational judgment test that presents candidates with real-world customer service challenges, requiring them to rank-order their responses. It provides insight into an applicants’ propensity to deliver excellent customer service and their problem-solving approach.
- **Managing Unexpected Situations (MUS)** – this paper and pencil test assesses a candidate’s ability to handle evolving situations, and problem-solving under pressure.
- **Role-Play Exercises** – OPC Assessment can provide off-the-shelf or bespoke role-play scenarios to help evaluate candidates’ potential customer service behaviours.

Additionally, OPC Assessment also provides verbal and numerical tests to ensure candidates meet competency levels for the role being undertaken. A structured approach helps organisations recruit individuals who can deliver excellent customer service while managing challenges effectively.

### Customer Service at the Expense of Safety?

Investing in the recruitment, training, and development of customer service teams is just as vital as supporting safety-critical staff. Skilled, confident employees can de-escalate conflict, enhance passenger experience, and contribute to a smoother, safer railway. By equipping frontline staff with the right skills and support, operators can improve efficiency, reduce risks – protecting employees’ wellbeing – and create a more positive travel environment for both customers and employees.

Laura concluded: ‘Great customer service should never come at the expense of safety. Conflict can arise when enforcing safety rules that may inconvenience or frustrates customers leading to heightened emotions. Customers may not understand the risks involved on the railway. However, preventing unsafe actions is always the right call. Equipping employees with strong communication and conflict management skills ensures they can handle these situations effectively – delivering customer service excellence and still keeping safety a priority.’

Looking to strengthen your customer service strategy, identify top talent, or develop your teams’ skills? Get in touch with the friendly experts at OPC – they’re here to help! 



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