



CASE STUDY: ELAINE'S CHALLENGING EXPERIENCE

By Nuzhat Lotia, University of Melbourne

Six months ago, Elaine began working at the retail outlet of a local cellular/mobile telecommunication company. Her main role was to help potential customers with queries on products and plans, or existing customers with questions or problems relating to their existing services or to new products and plans. Elaine had been very excited about the work. She loved technology and enjoyed interacting with people, so this job brought her two passions together. Her initial training covered knowledge of the products and technology on offer as well as customer service. After six months, she was feeling confident in her job and role. She also had a good working relationship with David, the store manager, even though he was known to be a tough and serious guy.

One day, a customer entered the store, walked up to Elaine, and said that she had a problem with her cell phone. The phone had stopped working and she wanted it replaced because she bought it only eight months ago. Elaine tested the phone and confirmed that it was not working. To find out what could be wrong with the phone, she asked the customer the last time it had functioned and her opinion about what had happened to it. The customer rolled her eyes and responded in a loud and irritated voice, "I don't know what happened to it. It was working one day and then died the next."

Removing the back cover of the phone, Elaine noticed water marks on the battery. It seemed that the phone had been dropped in water or some liquid. Looking down at the phone, she raised her eyebrows and smirked. "Did you drop the phone in water or something?" At this, the customer suddenly started shouting that was she being accused of lying. Swearing under her breath, she demanded to see the manager. Elaine was taken aback by the customer's outburst. She stiffened and did not know how to respond.

The customer banged her fist on the counter, pointed at Elaine, and demanded: "You go and get the manager for me right now . . . or else." Elaine raised her voice to drown out the customer's shouting and said that she could see from the state of the battery inside the phone that it had been dropped in water and if that was the case, they would not be able to replace it.

Elaine's public announcement made the customer furious. She practically screamed that this had been her worst experience with the company, that she was never able to make calls because the cellular network had such poor reception, and that she was always overcharged for her calls. Elaine blushed with embarrassment, wondering what impact this rant would have on the other customers in the store. She attempted to diffuse the issue by pointing out in a stern voice that these reasons were not why the customer had come to the store and that she needed to call up the

customer service line to have them resolved. This only infuriated the customer further.

By now, other customers in the store were staring at them. It was at this point that David, the store manager, came out onto the store floor and took the customer aside. Elaine stood there trembling; she had never had this kind of experience with a customer before. She stood there, her gaze fixed on the woman and David. She could hear the customer's loud voice and could see her animated hand and arm actions. At once, both David and the customer turned and looked at Elaine.

Caught off-guard, Elaine quickly turned around and went to the back of the shop. She wasn't sure how much of the interaction David had witnessed or heard. She was particularly worried because she had a performance review meeting scheduled with him that afternoon. Elaine was certain that this morning's interaction with the customer would come up in their discussions.

Later that afternoon, Elaine knocked on David's office door and entered. She noticed David had a frown on his face. Elaine smiled, trying to start the meeting on a positive note. Without smiling back, David abruptly asked Elaine how she thought she was performing after working with the company for six months. Elaine was surprised by the question as she had expected David to tell her how she had been performing.

She replied, "Ummm, I don't know, David. I thought that was something you were going to tell me."

"Yes, I'll tell you that later, but for now I would like to know how you think your performance has been so far," he replied.

Elaine was silent as she had not been prepared to respond to such a question. David waited for a bit and then leaned forward against his desk and said, "Surely, Elaine, you should know how you have been doing at your job. After all, *you* are the one who has been doing *your* job," he stated with a distinct tone of irritation.

Elaine was taken aback. She looked down and in a low tone said, "I think I have been doing very well at the job, David."

"We all think that we are doing well, don't we?" David responded with a smirk.

"I don't know," Elaine murmured.

"What did you say? Please speak loudly, Elaine."

Elaine, who was by this time feeling quite nervous and a little afraid, stammered, "I said I don't know . . . I mean, I am not sure. I think I have been doing well on the cash register, in helping customers with their questions, in ensuring that the store is clean . . ."

"But we all do that, Elaine," David interrupted in a raised voice. "I want to know what *you* have done well and what *you* have contributed. And what about this morning?"

Would you say you were helpful? You should not have accused the customer of lying."

Elaine started to say that she had not done so, but David went on to say he had noticed that Elaine was often rude to customers and not attentive to them. This came as a complete surprise to Elaine and she asked if David could tell her exactly when this had happened. David waved his hand and said that it was not necessary to do so.

Feeling attacked, Elaine felt tears welling up in her eyes.

"Elaine, we should meet another time," David suggested. "Please think about my question and when you have an answer, let's meet. Until then, your probation will continue. Now please stop crying and make yourself presentable as there are customers outside." He then turned around and started working on his computer.

Elaine ran to the bathroom and tried to calm down. She had no idea what had just happened. She had gone into the

meeting thinking her employment would be confirmed as she believed that she had worked really hard and no one had told her otherwise. She wanted the security and income stability of a permanent job. She had thought that the meeting with David was just a formality. "Oh why had no one told me that this meeting would be so tough?" Elaine asked herself with sadness. With these thoughts, she went back out to the front of the store.

Discussion Questions

1. Consider Elaine's interaction with the customer and David and identify and analyze the sources of conflict in this situation.
2. How would you assess Elaine's approach to managing the conflict?
3. What do you think should have been done differently?