

Denial. One of the more frustrating experiences for culturally diverse people is to complain about differential treatment and to be told that the treatment “had nothing to do with” their race, gender, disability, and so forth. Mostly such conversations end in stalemate because the people arguing are trying to win a debate about who is right. In these situations, use a combination of Clue 5: Use Group-Level Radar and Clue 4: Apply Cross-Cultural Patterns.

You can turn the tendency to deny into an advantage in a customer-related situation. Most people understand the notion of satisfying, even delighting, the customer when she has a problem. Educate your employees—and yourself—that the natural first response when the customer alleges they have been treated poorly because of their group identity is to deny it. No one wants to be seen as being biased.

Accept that you have biases, and get your employees to accept this fact, too. Then remind them to be calm in situations where they may have made a mistake culturally, and to consider the customer’s perception just as they would in a standard service recovery situation.



1. COMPANY GUIDELINES
2. LAW
3. YOUR LENS
4. CULTURAL PATTERNS
5. GROUP RADAR
6. COACH
7. ENVIRONMENT

I have seen hotel workers recover somewhat in such situations. Several times, I have been given special privileges, such as a late hotel checkout, when the colleagues I was traveling with—in each case black women—were denied these privileges. So we went to the front desk together and explained the situation. The desk clerk usually corrected the problem without much fight.

The opportunity is ripe, however, to delight my colleague as a customer by showing cultural skill, rather than simply correcting a mistake. In most situations like this, my colleagues have to fight to get what they want. What I see them getting is a somewhat grudging correction.

Here is another possibility: If your employee were to *acknowledge* the customer's experience that she may have been treated differently, that customer is more likely to be delighted, because most people will deny her claim. The conversation might unfold like this:

Colleague: *When I talked to you, you would not allow me to take a late checkout, but when Mr. Finn talked to you, you gave him the late checkout. What's the difference?*

Desk clerk: *That should never have happened, ma'am. I apologize. I'm also sorry for the inconvenience of your having to come back here and follow up this error. I will put you in for a late check out right now. Is there anything else I can do?*

Colleague: *I'm just frustrated and angry that this happened in the first place. I don't understand why I was treated differently in this case.*

Desk clerk: *It was my mistake, and I can see why you feel you were treated differently. That is not the impression we want to create with our customers. I want you to be delighted with our service and feel respected. I'm actually glad you brought it to my attention.*

You may use different words, but remember these principles:

Don't deny the customer's perception or experience.

Aim for delight, not grudging acceptance. Simply correcting the mistake without dialogue is enough to cover you, but doesn't give you the opportunity to surprise, delight, and recover the customer by being willing to hear her frustration with what could be discriminatory treatment. You can shock the person with delight if you actually are willing to hear her talk about being treated differently. Telling her you are glad she brought it up might be the biggest shock of her life.



1. COMPANY GUIDELINES
2. LAW
3. YOUR LENS
4. CULTURAL PATTERNS
5. GROUP RADAR
6. COACH
7. ENVIRONMENT

Don't debate. Demonstrate acceptance. In most cases, it is probably not necessary for you to openly state or admit bias; but you can communicate that you accept her version of events by phrases like "I can see why you feel you were treated differently."

Look to your organization's commitment to customers or to diversity as a beacon (Clue 1). The desk clerk's statement about the impression the hotel wants customers to have is an example of using the organization's principle about service across difference.

► ***Shock a diverse customer. Thank them for being "too sensitive."***