

## Proactive mindsets in tourism-oriented business: Resolution skills in customer complaints

**Rudyard Ryann T. Verano** (Department of Hospitality Management, North Eastern Mindanao State University, ryannverano76@gmail.com, Philippines)

**James Q. Grefalde** (Department of Business Management, North Eastern Mindanao State University, jgrefalde@nemsu.edu.ph, Philippines)

**Clara G. Erlina** (Department of Hospitality Management, North Eastern Mindanao State University, cgerlina@nemsu.edu.ph, Philippines)

**Jason V. Chavez** (Graduate School, Zamboanga Peninsula Polytechnic State University, jasonchavez615@gmail.com, Philippines)

### Abstract

*In tourism-oriented businesses, customer complaints represent critical moments that can either damage or strengthen customer relationships depending on how effectively they are resolved. Despite extensive research on complaint management and service recovery, limited attention has been given to the role of proactive mindsets in enhancing resolution skills among hospitality professionals. Anchored on Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory, this exploratory, qualitative study investigates how proactive thinking is perceived to contribute to complaint resolution and identifies strategies that cultivate such mindsets. Semi-structured, one-on-one interviews were conducted with 18 hospitality managers from various tourism establishments in Surigao del Sur, Philippines, and analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis. The findings suggest that managers with a proactive mindset demonstrated heightened anticipation, preparedness, and adaptive problem-solving, which they reported as improving perceived resolution effectiveness and customer satisfaction. Furthermore, the study identified actionable strategies—such as anticipatory scenario-based training, frontline empowerment practices, and data-driven pattern tracking—that successfully strengthened proactive approaches within hospitality teams. While relying on self-reported perspectives, this research provides valuable descriptive insights into developing a proactive service culture.*

### Keywords

*proactive mindset, complaint management, service recovery, resolution skills, hospitality industry*

### 1. Introduction

While extensive research exists on complaint management and reactive service recovery in the hospitality industry [Akarsu et al., 2022; Davis and Horney, 2015; Garlick, 2023], there remains a noticeable gap in understanding how proactive mindsets shape the self-reported resolution skills of hospitality professionals. In the competitive tourism landscape, customer satisfaction is a critical factor for long-term success and organizational reputation [Hassan et al., 2023]. Traditionally, organizations have focused on reactive approaches, addressing issues only after they occur [Xola, 2023]. However, with evolving traveler expectations, effective complaint resolution requires not just technical skills, but a proactive mindset [Raki et al., 2021]. A proactive mindset allows managers and staff to anticipate customer needs, prevent potential service failures, and respond thoughtfully when complaints arise [Growett, 2024; Jiang et al., 2022]. This shift from reactive fixes to early detection aligns with proactive behavior, which is generally described as self-starting, future-oriented, and focused on overcoming barriers [Parker et al., 2010]. This study is anchored in Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory [Bandura, 1986], which emphasizes the dynamic interaction between cognitive processes, behavioral responses, and environmental factors. Within this framework, a proactive mindset represents the cognitive dimension influencing how individuals approach challenges such as customer complaints. Bandura's concept of

self-efficacy—the belief in one's ability to handle specific situations successfully—provides insight into how employees' confidence and cognitive readiness affect their problem-solving and communication skills during customer interactions [Kim et al., 2024; Maripat, 2024]. Anticipation and preparedness are essential components of this cognitive readiness. Anticipation involves recognizing early signs of service breakdowns or customer dissatisfaction, while preparedness means being equipped through training, empowerment, and protocols to respond effectively. Cultivating this proactive orientation within a tourism-oriented business requires targeted organizational strategies, such as anticipatory training, the empowerment of frontline staff to make decisions, and leadership that actively models proactive behavior [Manfreda et al., 2024]. When these elements are integrated, managers report perceived improvements in service quality and customer satisfaction [Guchait, 2024]. Effective proactive resolution is thought to not only rectify the immediate complaint but also potentially turn a negative experience into a loyalty-building opportunity. Addressing the identified gap, the present study employs an exploratory, qualitative research design to investigate how proactive mindsets are perceived to enhance resolution skills in managing customer complaints within tourism businesses. Relying on the self-reported experiences of hospitality management professionals, this study seeks to uncover the behaviors and cognitive approaches that contribute to complaint resolution. Furthermore, it aims to identify specific organizational strategies that strengthen proactive approaches among hospitality teams. By exploring these dynamics descriptively, this study offers practical insights that can guide businesses in developing a proactive

service culture.

## 2. Methods

### 2.1 Research design

This study employs an exploratory qualitative research design to investigate the perceived role of proactive mindsets in enhancing resolution skills for managing customer complaints in tourism-oriented businesses. The exploratory design is appropriate for this study because it allows for an in-depth understanding of the self-reported perceptions, experiences, and strategies of hospitality management professionals regarding proactive approaches to complaint resolution.

### 2.2 Population and sampling

The population of the study consists of hospitality management professionals from Surigao del Sur, Philippines, working in tourism-oriented businesses. A purposive sampling technique was utilized to select participants who have direct, hands-on experience in handling customer complaints and implementing resolution strategies. The study sample includes 18 managers, ensuring insights are gathered from individuals with relevant expertise and firsthand experience in the domain of customer service management. To provide a clearer understanding of the sample composition, Table 1 summarizes the participants' characteristics, including the type of business, business size, role, and years of experience.

### 2.3 Instrument

Data were collected through semi-structured, one-on-one interviews guided by an interview protocol specifically designed

to address the study's two main objectives: understanding how proactive mindsets influence resolution skills in managing customer complaints, and identifying strategies that strengthen proactive approaches in complaint resolution. The interview questions were carefully developed to elicit detailed and insightful responses from participants regarding their experiences, practices, and perceptions related to proactive problem-solving and complaint management. This approach allowed for an in-depth exploration of participants' perspectives while maintaining flexibility to probe further on relevant issues as they arose during the interviews. Table 2 presents the list of guide questions used by this research study.

### 2.4 Data gathering procedure

Data collection was conducted via individual interviews, which allowed for a flexible yet focused discussion of the participants' perspectives. Prior to the interviews, participants were briefed about the purpose of the study, and informed consent was obtained. Each interview was audio-recorded with permission to ensure accuracy and completeness of the data. Interviews were then transcribed verbatim for analysis.

### 2.5 Data analysis

The collected data were analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis. To ensure clarity and rigor, this approach involved a systematic, multi-stage process. First, the researchers familiarized themselves with the data by reading the verbatim transcripts multiple times. Next, initial codes were generated by highlighting significant statements and phrases related to proactive behaviors and complaint resolution. These codes

Table 1: Participant characteristics

Respondent	Type of Business	Business Size	Role/Position	Years of Experience
R1	Beach Resort	Large (100 + rooms)	Front Office Manager	8 years
R2	Boutique Hotel	Small (15 rooms)	General Manager	12 years
R3	Eco-Tourism Lodge	Micro (5 cabins)	Operations Manager	4 years
R4	City Business Hotel	Medium (50 rooms)	Guest Relations Manager	6 years
R5	Wellness Spa & Resort	Medium (40 rooms)	Spa & Recreation Manager	10 years
R6	Travel Agency/Tour Operator	Small (10 employees)	Customer Experience Lead	5 years
R7	Dive Resort	Small (20 rooms)	Resort Manager	15 years
R8	Beachfront Inn	Micro (8 rooms)	Owner / Manager	7 years
R9	Tourism Transport Service	Medium (15 vehicles)	Operations Supervisor	9 years
R10	Heritage Hotel	Medium (35 rooms)	Front Desk Supervisor	3 years
R11	Beach Resort	Large (120 rooms)	Food & Beverage Manager	11 years
R12	Glamping Site	Small (12 tents)	Camp Manager	4 years
R13	Boutique Hotel	Small (18 rooms)	Duty Manager	6 years
R14	Island Hopping Tour Provider	Micro (3 boats)	Lead Coordinator	5 years
R15	City Business Hotel	Medium (60 rooms)	Reservations Manager	8 years
R16	Luxury Villa Rentals	Small (5 villas)	Property Manager	14 years
R17	Beach Resort	Large (150 rooms)	Guest Services Director	13 years
R18	Eco-Tourism Lodge	Small (10 cabins)	Front Office Supervisor	4 years

Table 2: Interview guide questions

Objectives	Interview Question
To explore how proactive mindsets help resolution skills in managing customer complaints in tourism-oriented businesses.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. How does having a proactive mindset influence the way resolution skills are applied in handling customer complaints?</li> <li>2. Can you describe situations where proactive thinking improved the effectiveness of resolving customer concerns?</li> <li>3. In your view, what role does anticipation and preparedness play in strengthening resolution skills during customer interactions?</li> </ol>
To identify the strategies that strengthen proactive mindsets in resolving customer complaints within tourism-oriented businesses.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. What specific strategies do you consider most effective in encouraging a proactive approach to complaint resolution?</li> <li>2. How do these strategies help in preventing issues from escalating into bigger customer concerns?</li> <li>3. Can you share examples of practices or techniques that consistently build a proactive mindset among staff when addressing complaints?</li> </ol>

were then collated and grouped to form overarching candidate themes based on shared meanings. The themes were subsequently reviewed and refined against the dataset to ensure they accurately reflected the participants' experiences and addressed the research objectives. Through this process, key patterns and insights were identified regarding the influence of proactive mindsets on complaint resolution and the strategies that support proactive approaches within tourism-oriented businesses. Reflexivity was maintained throughout the analysis to acknowledge and minimize researcher bias, ensuring a credible interpretation of participants' experiences and perspectives.

### 3. Results

Research Objectives 1. To explore how proactive mindsets, help resolution skills in managing customer complaints in tourism-oriented businesses.

#### 3.1 Anticipating guest needs through early observation

A fundamental aspect of a proactive mindset involves training staff to observe and respond to early behavioral cues before a guest explicitly complains. Participants reported that monitoring non-verbal indicators—such as a guest frowning, checking their watch repeatedly, or looking confused—allows frontline staff to intervene early. Managers noted that when staff anticipate concerns by offering immediate assistance or alternatives (e.g., refreshments during a delay), minor inconveniences are kept from escalating into formal complaints. According to the respondents, this anticipatory approach is perceived to enhance operational efficiency, as problems are resolved smoothly, leading to self-reported improvements in guest trust and satisfaction.

“I train my team to spot early signs of dissatisfaction from a guest frowning at a meal, delays in check-in and act immediately... We observe behavioral cues in the lobby like a family struggling with luggage without asking for help. These are all opportunities to step in before dissatisfaction grows.”

“When we anticipate concerns, we prevent problems from

escalating. Preparedness allows us to solve issues before guests even feel the need to complain.”

#### 3.2 Assuming immediate responsibility and demonstrating genuine care

Rather than focusing on organizational policies or assigning blame, managers with a proactive mindset prioritize taking immediate ownership of the guest's experience. Respondents shared that empowering staff to make on-the-spot decisions and proactively checking in with guests during services (such as spa treatments) creates a safe space for guests to voice mild discomforts. Participants perceived that keeping guests updated and providing quick reassurance demonstrates genuine care and professionalism. From the managers' perspectives, when preparedness becomes a daily habit, staff respond with empathy rather than hesitation, which they felt significantly protected the overall guest experience and reinforced loyalty.

“For me, being proactive means taking responsibility right away. Even if we're not at fault, we acknowledge the concern and show the guest that their experience matters.”

“We realized many clients feel shy or hesitant to speak up during spa treatments even when they're not fully comfortable... We trained our therapists to proactively check in with guests at key points of the service. This creates a safe space for clients to voice concerns without feeling bothersome.”

#### 3.3 Utilizing feedback for preventive action and systemic preparedness

The final theme highlights a cognitive shift where complaints and minor feedback are viewed as constructive data rather than individual failures. Managers expressed that monitoring both formal complaints and brief comments on surveys allows them to identify recurring patterns (e.g., room humidity, slow Wi-Fi). By proactively analyzing this feedback, establishments can initiate preventive maintenance, update procedures, or prepare backup plans before a larger trend of dissatisfaction occurs. Participants noted that this level of systemic preparedness minimizes service disruptions, gives staff confidence

during unexpected glitches, and is believed to drive continuous improvement across the organization.

“A proactive mindset means we analyze complaints as feedback, not failures. Every concern a guest raises is treated as an opportunity to improve, not a mistake to hide.”

“We monitor guest feedback trends daily not just the major complaints but even the short comments in surveys... Anticipation reduces the need for complaints because potential problems are addressed before guests even notice them. Preparedness strengthens the team’s confidence, as they have clear procedures and contingency plans in place.”

Research Objectives 2. To identify the strategies that strengthen proactive mindsets in resolving customer complaints within tourism-oriented businesses.

### 3.4 Targeted training and scenario-based practice

To shift staff from a reactive to an anticipatory mindset, managers reported relying heavily on continuous, short-burst training sessions rather than traditional lectures. Participants highlighted the use of weekly micro role-plays based on real, recent complaint scenarios, coupled with emotional intelligence coaching. This practice allows employees to safely practice recognizing subtle behavioral cues—such as a hesitant tone or repeated follow-ups—and responding with supportive language. According to the respondents, this scenario-based preparation builds confidence, prevents panic during unexpected situations, and is perceived to significantly reduce the likelihood of guests feeling the need to formally complain.

“We coach our staff to detect early signs of frustration like repeated follow-ups, confused looks, or changes in tone because guests often communicate dissatisfaction through behavior before stating it verbally.”

“We conduct weekly micro role-plays using real complaint scenarios from the past week. These sessions are designed not to blame mistakes, but to highlight what could have been anticipated earlier... Preparation gives staff the confidence to handle unexpected situations professionally.”

### 3.5 Frontline empowerment and immediate action boundaries

A recurring strategy identified in the interviews was granting frontline employees the authority to resolve minor issues on the spot without waiting for managerial approval. Managers noted that establishing clear boundaries for decision-making—such as authorizing staff to offer a complimentary beverage during delays or immediately dispatch maintenance—prevented hesitation. Participants observed that when small issues (like a defective keycard or aircon noise) are solved immediately, it prevents negative emotions from building up. From the man-

agers’ perspectives, this trust-based empowerment not only speeds up resolution but also makes guests feel respected and actively cared for, which they believed turned potential complaints into positive service recovery moments.

“I give my team authority to fix small issues immediately like offering complimentary beverages for delays or sending maintenance proactively... hesitation often allows problems to escalate.”

“When small issues are solved immediately like fixing an aircon noise or replacing a defective keycard, guests feel taken care of... It also prevents the issue from affecting more guests, avoiding a ripple of negative experiences.”

### 3.6 Visible leadership and data-driven pattern tracking

The final strategy theme encompasses both cultural and systemic reinforcements. Culturally, respondents emphasized that visible leadership—where managers actively greet guests and assist on the frontline—creates psychological safety and sets a behavioral standard for the team to mirror. Systemically, managers shared that they utilize data-driven complaint pattern tracking to identify root causes, such as slow check-ins during peak hours. By discussing these tracked patterns in pre-shift briefings, the entire team knows what friction points to anticipate. Participants felt that combining visible leadership with proactive tracking reinforced a shared organizational culture where preventing complaints is valued just as highly as resolving them.

“When managers are visible and proactive greeting guests, responding quickly, and helping directly, the team naturally mirrors that behavior. This approach also creates psychological safety, motivating employees to act confidently.”

“We track recurring complaints in a log and use this data to identify clear patterns such as slow check-ins during peak hours... Instead of treating each issue individually, the team investigates root causes to find long-term fixes that prevent the problem from happening again.”

## 4. Discussion

The findings of this study can be interpreted through the lens of Bandura’s Social Cognitive Theory (SCT), which posits that human behavior is shaped by the continuous interaction of personal, behavioral, and environmental factors [Bandura, 1986]. In the context of tourism-oriented businesses, having a proactive mindset represents a critical personal factor that influences how managers apply resolution skills in handling customer complaints.

SCT emphasizes the role of self-efficacy—the belief in one’s ability to successfully perform tasks—as a driver of behavior. The current study’s findings align with this concept, as managers with proactive mindsets demonstrated higher self-reported

self-efficacy in anticipating potential issues and preparing effective responses [Kim et al., 2024]. This suggests that proactive mindsets strengthen resolution skills by enabling managers to act confidently and decisively in dynamic customer service scenarios, shifting their operational stance from reaction to anticipation [Jiang et al., 2022].

The study also highlights organizational strategies that reinforce proactive mindsets, reflecting SCT's focus on the interaction between behavior and environmental influences. Participants identified methods such as continuous scenario-based training, frontline empowerment, and data-driven pattern tracking as effective ways to build proactive approaches among staff. These strategies act as environmental facilitators, providing opportunities for observation, learning, and the reinforcement of adaptive behaviors [Manfreda et al., 2024]. In SCT terms, these practices enhance behavioral capability, equipping staff with the knowledge and boundaries necessary to handle complex customer interactions.

Furthermore, the dynamic interplay of personal, behavioral, and environmental factors underscores the cyclical learning process central to SCT. Anticipation, preparedness, and reflective practices (such as analyzing complaint logs) illustrate self-regulation, as managers monitor customer interactions, adjust responses, and refine strategies based on feedback. This continuous cycle of learning aligns with SCT's core principle that behavior, personal factors, and the environment mutually influence one another. By fostering personal attributes such as self-efficacy and supporting them through targeted organizational strategies, tourism businesses can cultivate a workforce capable of effectively managing customer complaints [Raki et al., 2021].

#### 4.1 Limitations

While this study provides valuable insights into proactive complaint management, several limitations must be acknowledged. First, the exploratory nature of the study and the small sample size of 18 hospitality managers limit the generalizability of the findings beyond the specific context of Surigao del Sur, Philippines. Second, the study relies entirely on self-reported management perspectives and lacks empirical, quantitative customer data to definitively measure the impact of these proactive strategies on actual customer satisfaction or loyalty. Future research should incorporate mixed-methods approaches, utilizing both employee behavioral metrics and direct guest feedback, to substantiate the perceived effectiveness of proactive resolution strategies across broader geographical tourism markets.

#### 5. Conclusion

This exploratory study highlights the perceived value of proactive mindsets in enhancing resolution skills for managing customer complaints within tourism-oriented businesses. The self-reported experiences of the hospitality managers suggest that staff who anticipate potential issues, observe subtle behav-

ioral cues, and take immediate responsibility can create a service environment where complaints are frequently prevented or addressed efficiently. Furthermore, by viewing complaints as constructive feedback rather than failures, tourism personnel can implement systemic improvements aimed at elevating service quality.

The findings indicate that strengthening proactive mindsets requires structured organizational strategies. Approaches such as anticipatory scenario training, empowering frontline employees to act immediately, visible leadership, and tracking complaint patterns appear crucial for building staff confidence and fostering a culture of early intervention. When integrated effectively, these strategies equip teams to respond quickly and demonstrate genuine care. Ultimately, moving from a reactive to a proactive service model is perceived by managers as a vital step toward reducing guest frustration, enhancing operational efficiency, and supporting long-term customer satisfaction in the competitive tourism landscape.

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