Case Study: The Quiet Upgrade

In the following interaction, Elena, a Russian business traveller, arrives at a four-star hotel in Manila for a five-night stay. She is greeted at the front desk by Aira, a recently promoted Filipino receptionist.

Aira: Good afternoon, ma'am. Welcome to the hotel. I'm very sorry, but your room is not yet ready due to a late checkout from the previous guest. May I ask you to wait briefly? We can offer you a complimentary drink while you wait.





Image 1: *https://www.shangri-la.com/en/landing/philippines-long-stay-offers/*
Image 2*: https://www.dreamstime.com/photos-images/hotel-receptionist-asia.html*

Elena: How long will it take?

Aira: It should not take long, ma'am. Thank you for your patience.

Elena: I've already been travelling all day.

Aira: I understand, ma'am. I apologize for the inconvenience.

After approximately forty minutes, Aira returns with a key card.

Aira: Thank you for waiting, ma'am. Your room is now ready. As an apology for the delay, we have upgraded you to an executive room at no additional charge.

Elena: I booked an ocean-view room. Is that still the case?

Aira: The room has a city view, ma'am, but it is larger and more comfortable. I thought this would be better for you, especially if you need to work during your stay.

Elena accepts the key without further comment.

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Eat evening, Elena contacts the front desk.

Elena: I am calling about my room. I booked an ocean-view room, but I was given a different room. Why was my reservation changed?

Aira: There was no problem with your booking, ma'am. I upgraded your room earlier to make up for the delay at check-in.

Elena: I did not request an upgrade. I specifically chose this hotel for the ocean view.
Aira: I'm very sorry, ma'am. I only wanted to ensure your comfort during your stay.

Elena: I understand, but please ask me first before changing my reservation.

The call ends.

After check-out, Elena leaves a two-star online review, noting that staff were friendly but that her booking preferences were not followed. Aira reflects on the interaction and is uncertain why her action, intended as assistance, resulted in dissatisfaction.

Modelled after: Neuliep, J. W. Intercultural Communication: A Contextual Approach: textbook. 7th ed. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, 2017

Theoretically supported by: Andaya, A. Influence of Culture and Communication Practices in Team Functioning: Case Studies on Japanese and Philippine Financial Project Teams: Master's thesis. Master of Science in Strategic Project Management (European), 2010. 95 p.





Image 1: https://www.filwebasia.com/job-dissatisfaction-in-the-philippines/
Image 2: https://www.shutterstock.com/image-vector/two-stars-icon-vector-1316819486

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Task 1: Read the case carefully and reflect on the interaction.

- What communicative goals did each participant pursue?
- Which expectations remained implicit, and how did this affect interpretation?
- At what specific moment did mutual understanding begin to diverge, and what triggered this shift (e.g., action, wording, or assumption)?
- How does Aira's behaviour reflect the Filipino customer service principles discussed in the reading?

Task 2: Discuss the following questions in your group:

1. What message did Aira intend to communicate through the upgrade, beyond its practical value?
2. Why did Elena interpret the action as unprofessional rather than considerate?
3. Did the misunderstanding originate primarily in:
    - the action itself,
    - the language used, or
    - differing expectations?

   Justify your answer.

1. How do Filipino values such as *malasakit* and *pasensya* shape Aira's decisions?
2. How do Russian expectations regarding transparency, efficiency, and personal autonomy influence Elena's response?
3. How does this case illustrate a tension between:
    - relationship-oriented service, and
    - preference-based service?
    - Which approach seems more effective in an EIL context, and why?

Task 3: Rewrite the situation so that both parties' intentions and expectations are made explicit before any decision is taken. Present your revised version as a short dialogue.

Then, formulate **three intercultural communication principles** that balance care, clarity and client autonomy.

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Task 4: Reformulate the statements below so they are appropriate in a professional international customer service context.

Statements by the receptionist:

1. I upgraded you to a bigger room because I wanted to make your stay more comfortable.
2. This room is an executive category, so it should be better for your needs.
3. We usually do this for guests who have experienced a delay.

Statements by the guest:

1. You should have asked me before changing my room.
2. That's not the room I booked.
3. I chose this hotel for the ocean view.

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Task 5: Present your revised dialogue and principles to the class.

Evaluate each group's soluttion based on the following table of criteria:

Criterion	0 – Not Demonstrated	1 – Developing	2 – Effective
Clarity of Communication	Ideas are unclear, vague, or poorly structured.	Meaning is generally understandable but may include some ambiguity.	Communication is clear, precise, and well-structured for an international audience.
Cultural Sensitivity	Shows little or no awareness of cultural differences.	Demonstrates some awareness but explanations may be superficial.	Demonstrates strong understanding of cultural perspectives and integrates them meaningfully.
Respect for Client Autonomy	Ignores or overrides client preferences.	Some inconsistent attempt to acknowledge client preferences.	Clearly prioritises client autonomy.
Effectiveness in Preventing Misunderstanding	Revised interaction does not address the source of confusion.	Addresses some causes of misunderstanding, but gaps remain.	Effectively preven misunderstanding b making expectations, intentions, and choices explicit.

Vote on the most effective solution and justify your choice.

Extension: To what extent should service providers adapt to client expectations versus maintaining their own communicative norms in EIL contexts? Provide examples to support your position.

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