Case Study: The Quiet Upgrade

A four-star business hotel in Manila is known for its personalised service and warm approach to guests. One afternoon, **Elena**, a Russian marketing manager travelling on business, arrives to check in for a five-night stay. At the front desk, she is greeted by **Aira**, a recently promoted Filipino receptionist who takes pride in being attentive and proactive.

Because the previous guest requested a late checkout, Elena's room is not ready when she arrives. The lobby is crowded. Aira offers an apology and a complimentary welcome drink.





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your room should be ready soon. Please have a welcome drink while you wait.

Elena: *"How long is 'soon'? I've already been travelling all day, and I don't really have time to wait too long."*

After about forty minutes, Aira hands Elena her key card.

Aira: *"Thank you for your patience, ma'am. To make up for the delay, we upgraded you to a bigger executive room. There's no extra charge."*

Elena: *"Okay, but is it the room I booked? I specifically asked for an ocean view."*

Aira: *"This room has a city view, ma'am, but it's much bigger. I thought it would be more comfortable, especially if you need to work."*

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Elena: *"Hello. This is Room 706. There's a problem with my room. I booked an ocean-view room, but I'm facing the city. Why was it changed?"*

Aira: *"There was no problem with your booking, ma'am. I upgraded your room earlier as an apology for the delay. I believed you would prefer the extra space."*

Elena: *"But that wasn't your decision to make. You changed my room without asking me."*

Aira: *"I'm really sorry, ma'am. I just wanted to take care of you and make your stay more comfortable."*

Elena: *"I understand you were trying to be nice, but that's not the point. I chose this hotel for the view. Next time, please ask first."*

The conversation ends politely, but the tone is tense. Aira apologises again. From her perspective, she acted with genuine concern for the guest and followed what she considers good service practice.

After checking out, Elena leaves an online review giving the hotel two stars. She describes the staff as "friendly but unprofessional" and writes that her preferences were ignored.

Aira feels confused and discouraged. She believed she showed care, patience, and initiative. She cannot understand why an action meant as kindness resulted in dissatisfaction.





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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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