



## Building Trust

*Establishing Fairness, Dignity, and Inclusion Across Cultures in Food Assistance Programs*

### The Context: Trauma and Perception

Food insecurity is more than a social or economic condition; it is a form of chronic, complex trauma that poses an ongoing threat to survival. This trauma often leads to **hypervigilance** and a **scarcity mindset**.

- **Hypervigilance:** The nervous system remains in a highly reactive, threat-detection mode. Guests are closely attuned to tone, mood, and facial expressions.
- **Scarcity Mindset:** The brain focuses intensely on immediate needs. The unconscious assumption is that resources are limited and may not be there tomorrow.
- **The Reality of Perception:** Because of these trauma responses, *perception overrides intention*. Impact matters more than intention.

## The Trust Framework

Trust is the ultimate outcome—ensuring people feel respected, welcome, safe, and look forward to returning when they need assistance.

### Customer Service (The Foundation)

The first and most consistent way people experience our programs.

- **Respectful First Contact:** Warm greeting, welcoming tone, preferred names.
- **Clear Communication:** Plain language, explaining what is happening and why.
- **Active Listening:** Let people fully explain their needs without interruption.
- **Responsiveness:** Solution-focused attitude with prompt follow-through.

### Cultural Humility

Ongoing self-awareness, curiosity, and respect in every single interaction.

- Assuming a "not knowing" attitude that resists assumptions and learns from guests.
- Recognizing our own bias about who "deserves" to receive assistance.
- Honoring cultural, religious, personal, and dietary needs without judgment.

## Fairness

Consistent, transparent, and impartial practices everyone can count on.

- Equitable access to food assistance with transparent distribution policies.
- Recognizing different people may need different supports to achieve equal access (e.g., family size, allergies).

## Inclusion & Dignity

Ensuring everyone feels they belong, are valued, and treated with worth.

- **Inclusion:** Honoring lived experiences, gathering feedback to shape practices, and verifying accessibility.
- **Dignity:** Treating every person with worth, avoiding scolding tones, and respecting privacy.

## The Communication Gap: When Perception Issues Arise

Our goal is not to prove that we meant no deliberate harm. The goal is to understand how our actions were interpreted and adapt our behavior to build trust.

**✗ DO NOT:** Argue, defend, repeatedly explain, or tell the person they misunderstood (i.e., that they are wrong).

**✓ DO APPLY THE 4-STEP RESPONSE PROTOCOL:**

1. **Listen** to their concerns fully.
2. **Validate** their perspective and their subjective experience.
3. **Briefly clarify** your intention or the objective policy.
4. **End on a supportive note** and consider what can be done differently next time.

## Real-World Application & Scenarios

### Scenario 1: Language and Perceived Favoritism

*A guest waiting in line notices the server laughing and chatting in another language with the person in front of them. When it is their turn, they ask why the other guest got more food, become visibly upset, and accuse the staff of unfair treatment.*

**Response Strategy:** Resist the urge to argue or defend the interaction. *Listen* to their frustration. *Validate* their perception (e.g., "I can see how that interaction might have looked like they were getting special treatment."). *Briefly clarify* ("Everyone receives the exact same amount to ensure fairness."). *End on a supportive note* ("We are glad you are here today, let's get your items loaded.").

## Scenario 2: Volunteer Access

*A guest becomes very upset when volunteers are seen taking food and other items. Accusations are made of special access and an unfair system where people with power get the most resources.*

**Response Strategy:** Do not defend the volunteers defensively. *Listen* to the underlying scarcity fear. *Validate* the perception ("I hear your concern, and I understand why seeing that feels unfair when resources are tight."). *Briefly clarify* the program's objective volunteer policy regarding food access. *End on a supportive note* reinforcing your commitment to providing them with the food they need today.

## Scenario 3: Setting Limits

*A guest consistently tries to take second helpings of food and becomes highly agitated when any limits are placed on them.*

**Response Strategy:** Recognize the scarcity mindset driving the behavior. Do not argue. *Listen* without interrupting. *Validate* their need ("I know it's incredibly stressful trying to make sure you have enough for the week."). *Briefly clarify* the limits gently ("We have to limit portions so that every family in line today gets a share."). *End supportively* by offering alternatives or connections to additional community resources if possible.

## Scenario 4: Religious Dietary Needs

*A guest tells you the regular food offered is prohibited by their religion, feeling disrespected. A worker remarks that obtaining "special" food isn't always possible, prompting the guest to question why their normal diet is labeled "special."*

**Response Strategy:** Apply cultural humility. Do not debate logistics. *Listen* to their feelings of exclusion. *Validate* their perspective ("You are absolutely right; your dietary needs are not 'special,' they are your standard, and I apologize for how that sounded."). *Briefly clarify* the current inventory constraints respectfully. *End supportively* by committing to note their needs for future orders and finding the best currently available options.

### Scenario 5: Fair is Not Always Equal

*There is one chocolate pudding left. An adult guest requests it, but you explain it was promised to a child in line. The guest asks why the child gets preference, noting other adults got pudding.*

**Response Strategy:** Do not argue the ethics of who deserves it more. *Listen* to the disappointment. *Validate* their perception ("I understand it's frustrating when you see something you want and it's the last one."). *Briefly clarify* ("Fairness sometimes means honoring a promise made earlier in the line to that child."). *End supportively* by offering the next best item available.



## The Trust Framework

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