

INVESTIGATIONS

INTERVIEWING TECHNIQUES

As a Steward, you will be expected to interview grievors and witnesses to gather the facts about what happened. Although there are no simple formulas, this guide offers considerations and techniques you might find useful.

An interview is not to be confused with a chat or casual conversation. An interview is normally directed toward meeting one or more specific objectives. It is also not one-way communication. Unless both parties participate in the exchange, there is no productive interview. Furthermore, the verbal and nonverbal behaviour of one person cannot be analyzed without considering the corresponding behaviours of the other person.

Setting the Stage

The physical environment for the interview should be comfortable and private, and as free from distractions and interruptions as possible. It may also be important to ask the grievor approximately how long they anticipate the interview will take. If you have other commitments which would interfere with completing the interview, it may be preferable to set an alternate time to meet.

Interviewing Barriers and Biases

Any distortion in the communication between interviewer and interviewee can be considered a barrier. In any interview situation, each person comes with a fixed set of attitudes, personality characteristics, motives, goals, and needs. Background characteristics which may influence the interview include age, gender, race, religious beliefs, income along with many others. Our experiences, value systems and prejudices affect our interpretation of what we see and hear. Our own biases may act as a filter for accepting or rejecting the other person in the interview situation. As a Steward, you will be more effective if you are aware of your own biases so you can work towards setting them aside and seeing things from the grievor's point of view.

Non-verbal Communication

Non-verbal communication includes such things as eye contact, facial expressions, and mannerisms. A pleasant and relaxed appearance encourages a relaxed and comfortable atmosphere. The initial impressions - gained in the first 30 to 60 seconds of the interview - can seriously affect the remainder of the interview. For some people, gum chewing, or excessive fidgeting may be serious irritations.

In interviews, participants are usually in close physical proximity, which can lead to nonverbal messages being greatly amplified. An innocuous movement (such as glancing at one's watch in the interview situation) can result in several interpretations or misinterpretations by the grievor. "Is the Steward bored?" "Am I keeping them too long?" These are reasonable interpretations of your behaviour but might not convey the message you intend.

Vocal Communication

Vocal communication includes such things as voice pleasantness, audibility, articulation, and projecting interest in the other person through the voice. Negative vocal factors could include speaking too fast or too slowly or speaking in a brash or impersonal manner.

Although physical and vocal communications are important, often the most important factor in a successful interview is the interviewee feeling that you are taking a personal and genuine interest in them and the interview.

Feedback Behaviour

Feedback behaviour concerns the willingness and sensitivity of one participant to respond to the various cues being received from the other. Remember that anything to which either party assigns meaning is considered a form of feedback, even if it is unintentional. Feedback can be verbal or non-verbal.

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Feedback Behaviour *(continued)*

A listening feedback technique designed to improve understanding is to summarize what the other person has said in your own words. This helps the other person feel that they are being heard and gives the interviewee the opportunity to clarify misunderstandings.

Sensitive or embarrassing topics may be difficult to address. A good interviewer will sense this and create an atmosphere in which the other person feels free to discuss these issues. Techniques for making a person feel safe are provided in [Crucial Conversations](#) training.

Listening and Questioning

True listening is about a good deal more than just hearing what the person is saying. It's about listening with eyes, ears, and insight, not only to the content but also to the feelings behind the content. Sometimes, the failure to ask the right question in an interview results from the failure to listen to earlier answers or nonverbal cues. Effective listening is hard work and involves a very active set of behaviours.

For many people, questions are often a prelude to accusations, advice, blame, or orders, and being asked a lot of questions can lead them to feel defensive about, particularly if they feel they are being interrogated.

As Stewards, it is our job to act as advocates for grievors. If we put them on the defensive with our questioning approaches, we may find that they have difficulty trusting that we will be able to advocate for them effectively.

Open Questions

Open questions are broad and basically unstructured; they simply indicate the topic to be discussed and let the interviewee structure the answer as they see fit. Open questions may vary in their degree of openness. For example: "Tell me about your problem" is much broader than "What do you plan to do about this problem in the future?"

Open questions cannot be answered by a "yes" or "no". The open question is often the best way to start a discussion with a grievor. You might focus the open question on a specific area or period to keep the interview focused and relevant to the investigation.

Direct Questions

As a Steward you will often be in situations where you will need direct answers to specific questions. Once rapport has been established, certain questions should be asked directly. You may want to ask for explanations or details about a particular point, such as: *"On average, how many hours per week do you spend working short staffed?"*

Closed Questions

Closed questions are a form of direct questions which greatly narrows the respondent's range of possible answers. For example: *"Given the fact that the employer states that you do not have the required qualifications for the position, what do you consider to be an equivalent combination of education, training and experience which will help us prove your case?"*

Yes/No Questions (Extreme Form of Closed Questions)

While the yes/no question may be useful for some purposes, it also tends to limit the amount of information obtained. A major problem with the "yes/no" question is that it might feel more like an interrogation than an interview.

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Probes

Probes are used to stimulate discussion to obtain further information, encouraging the interviewee to communicate more fully so that they enlarge, clarify, or explain their responses. Probes allow the interviewer to follow up on incomplete or superficial responses. Some examples of probes include:

- > What do you mean by that?
- > Could you give me an example of what you mean?
- > I would like to know more about your thinking on that.
- > What do you have in mind when you say that?
- > Why do you think that is so?
- > Could you tell me more about that?
- > Why do you feel that way?
- > Is there anything else that may be affecting the situation?

Probing is also useful to ensure that the speaker knows that you are paying attention and are interested in what they have to say.

Handling Lengthy or Off-topic Responses

If an interviewee is talking a lot about things that are not relevant to the interview, use more closed questions and narrow the focus of questions (e.g., focus on a specific time frame or situation).

In addition to the use of closed question, you may intervene during your interviewee's answers to refocus their attention tactfully on the heart of your inquiry. The challenge here is to provide the speaker with cues that you wish to move on in the interview without alienating them in the process. For example: *"That's very interesting and I would like to hear more about it if time permits, but there are some specific points we need to cover in this interview. Do you mind if we come back to this and move into the area of ____?"*

Handling Short and Incomplete Responses

An interviewee might give short and incomplete responses. Sometimes this is because they lack confidence or are experiencing anxiety. If you detect this in the early stages of the interview, it is important to spend more time on rapport building than usual. Stories about similar experiences or backgrounds between the two of you may help. Also, if you do detect nervousness, it is wise to start your interview with relatively easy questions.

To encourage more detailed responses, use open-ended questions and short probes such as:

- > Tell me more.
- > Oh?
- > Could you clarify that for me?
- > That's interesting, what makes you feel that way?
- > Anything else?

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Dealing with Anger

Your initial response to anger should be one of calm neutrality and sincere interest. Allow the interviewee to have their say uninterrupted.

To intervene or defend yourself at the outset is to run the risk of escalation. Few people will continue attacking or arguing with a reasonable, receptive, and empathetic listener. Once the interviewee has finished, your response should be one of clarification. It is essential that you gather all the facts as the other person sees them. If their words upset you, your emotional response can distort or blind you to what they are saying. You can be so busy planning your defensive response that you stop actively listening to what is being said. When you have determined that you do understand the problem through use of restatement and probes, you can then contradict their statements if you believe they are founded upon incomplete or distorted information.

The target of anger in such an interview may be yourself, someone else, or a group of philosophy with which you are associated. When the anger is directed at you, it is important to avoid the very human tendency to “respond in kind”. After the angry person has calmed down (which invariably they will if you remain in control), strive to understand the nature of the anger or complaint - restate to get clarification. If the anger is focused on your behaviour, you may be able to either:

1. See their point of view and rectify your behaviour, or
2. Provide them with your own interpretation and intent of the behaviour.

Help the person to see that the conflict is not between the two of you but rather between two points of view regarding a specific action or behaviour. Productive discussion can then resume.

When the interviewee's anger is directed at someone else, it is again important to remain calm and to probe for understanding and clarity. The greatest pitfall during this kind of interview is to defend the person at whom the interviewee's anger is directed.

Closing the Interview

If, during your conversation, you and the interviewee agree on interpretation of events, determine precisely what should be done about the problem, immediately and in the long term. If such planning requires greater investigation, that process should be decided on and future appointments made.

Summary

An effective interviewer must recognize potential barriers and biases and should be aware of communication strengths and weaknesses. Being flexible with different types of questions should enhance your interviewing skills. As a Steward, your members see you as the face of the union. You have a unique opportunity to help build the union simply by your positive approach in dealing with the members at your worksite.

Keep up the good work!