

The Other Side of the Table

In many cases, the best evidence you collect during an investigation will be from the witnesses of the alleged event. If you can get their full perspective, it can bring clarity to disputes between the complainant and the accused. Unfortunately, witnesses who are fearful of facing retribution often provide a less than complete account. Here's how to put them at ease and get their story.



Acknowledge Them

When you first introduce yourself to a witness, there's a very good chance they are distracted by their nerves or uncertainty over the process.

Thank them and let them know their contributions are valuable. And while you generally can't promise confidentiality, assure them that any reported retaliation against witnesses will be taken seriously, investigated, and could result in termination.



Use the Funnel Approach

Begin with questions that are non-threatening, such as name, job description, and how did you interact with the complainant and accuser while at work.

Once you've established rapport, move the interview into open-ended questions that will allow them to provide context. Towards the end of the interview, shift to the specific questions about the alleged event. Always allow the witness to provide more context.



Establish the Right Tone

While it's tempting to lighten the conversation in order to help put interviewees more at ease, it's important that they understand interviewing is a serious process. Otherwise, they may assume the outcome is prejudged or that the alleged offense is non-serious and getting swept under the rug.

At the same time, an interview isn't an interrogation. The primary goal is to collect their perspective, not to challenge their assessments or viewpoints.

The investigator should create an environment that maximizes the chances of obtaining reliable information.

Association of Workplace Investigators: Guiding Principles