

Grievance Interviewing

Workers bring all kinds of problems and concerns to their union stewards, and an issue is rarely cut-and-dried. Often, it's only through effective interviewing and investigation that the steward can get all the information and facts needed to totally understand and work out a solution to the problem.

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There's a tried-and-true way to handle the interview stage of the process, and even the most veteran steward might find it useful to review his or her practices to make sure all bases are covered.

The Five Ws

Stewards know that the key to good interviewing skills is the process of getting — and writing down — information by using the “five Ws”:

- **WHO** is the worker? (the basics of name, job title, employee number, shift, seniority, etc.); WHO witnessed the incident or was involved in the situation?; WHO are the management people involved?
- **WHAT** happened or failed to happen? WHAT did the worker(s) do? WHAT did management say, do, or fail to do? WHAT's happened in the past that could have contributed to the situation (including any past “run-ins” or disciplines)? WHAT should be done? (the remedy)
- **WHEN** did the incident happen? (date, time)
- **WHERE** did the incident happen? (location). WHERE do we go from here? (what are the next steps the steward will take to follow up after the interview).
- **WHY** did the incident happen? (this question often generates more opinion than fact, but it is important and the steward should dig for the facts)

Stewards new to interviewing often find it useful to write these questions out ahead of time and have them in hand when doing the interview. Don't be embarrassed by having a “script” — it demonstrates your preparation. Be sure to make notes during interviews, because memories are tricky and you're likely to forget a key fact—or, for a busy steward, confuse one grievance case with another. Your union may provide some type of interview form you can use.

More than “Just the Facts”

Experienced stewards know that a good interview goes beyond a “just the facts, ma'am” encounter. A good interview is a two-way communication that collects information, demonstrates the union's concern, and involves the worker in taking responsibility to analyze the issue. Remember, as well, that you are the “official” face of the union, and should want the worker to feel confident in the union's ability to represent members.

Here are some tips to make your interview more effective:

- 1 Choose the right place and time for the interview.** A convenient, quiet place when you're not both rushed is best. You want to be out of hearing of everyone, management and co-workers alike. You want the worker's side of the story at this point: later, if appropriate, you can interview others.
- 2 Actively listen.** Encourage the worker to talk freely — it's important for a worker to “vent” feelings initially. Something has upset the worker enough to ask the union for help, so stay tuned in to that emotion but don't let it rule the entire interview. Convey an open and attentive attitude. Say little except to make good use of phrases such as “I understand” or “Could you tell me more?”
- 3 Direct the interview.** Once the worker's feelings are out, tactfully steer the conversation to what you

still need to know. Build on what the worker has already said by repeating his or her own phrases. This technique indicates that you did listen and would like him or her to talk more about that area. For example, the worker may say: “My supervisor was always checking up on me.” The steward's response should be: “You say your supervisor was always checking on you? Tell me about that,” then wait for the worker to share additional information.

4 “Is there anything else . . .” Experienced stewards know these two truths: Bad things happen to good workers and bad things happen to not-so-good workers. So when you think you have heard the whole story, ask the question “Is there anything else I need to know about what happened?” Your open, prepared approach throughout the interview sets the stage for trust with the worker so he or she is more likely to share if there is “more.” It's a good time to know if there's “more.”

5 Weighing alternatives. Once you've heard the worker's feelings and obtained the facts, the two of you may want to explore possible solutions to the problem. Even though you may have ideas about what to do next, ask the worker what he or she thinks should be done. Examine suggested solutions with the worker by asking, “What effect would that action have on you, on your supervisor, or on your co-workers?” Talk it out. If there's additional information you need — a department policy or some other document — involve the worker in the information gathering.

You may succeed in involving the worker in solving the problem or developing an action plan that is truly his or her own. That's a much more satisfying and empowering experience than the steward “solving” the problem for the worker — and empowerment is the essence of being union.

— Pat Thomas. The writer is on the staff of the Service Employees