

Five Guiding Principles and Twenty-Six Tips for Effective Witness Interviews

Richard P. Kusserow | June 2023

The interviews, by definition, are conversations with a purpose, and there are five guiding principles for conducting effective witness interviews during any investigation or inquiry: (A) Projecting a Professional Image, (B) Establishing Rapport, (C) Being Prepared, (D) Maintaining Interview Control, and (E) Keeping Focus. In addition, many other tips will help ensure success.

Project Professional Image. Conducting effective investigation interviews begins with the appearance of the interviewer. These are formal business meetings, and those conducting them should dress accordingly. The demeanor of the interviewer is important to the outcome of the interview. If the interviewer appears quietly competent and professional, it will encourage confidence in the individual being interviewed. It also reduces nervousness in innocent parties and increases nervousness in guilty ones. The manner should always be polite but firm. Cooperation is essential; intimidation is counter-productive and possibly disastrous to the outcome. Under no circumstances should the interviewer disrespect the person being interviewed.

Establish Rapport. Beginning an interview with five or ten minutes of easy conversation and simple questions to establish rapport will help reduce tension and increase better communication and cooperation. It also permits observing the person's behavioral patterns during this initial more relaxed discourse which can be very valuable in assessing responses when the interview begins addressing more serious issues.

Be Prepared. Productive interviews depend in considerable measure on advanced preparation that defines the objectives for the interview and provides an outline of identifies needed information. Preparing the key points to be covered as a guide is useful, but not a checklist of questions that would turn the interview into something more like an interrogation. It is best to

use open-ended questions and permit the person to relate what they know. Often, interviewees will cover many of the points in your guide in telling their story. At the end of the interview, review the guide to see if all the points were covered.

Maintain Control of Interviews. The person conducting the interview asks the questions and seeks information, not the person being interviewed. The interviewer does not provide information, especially about the status of the investigation, offer their opinions, or what others have said. To do otherwise risks losing control of the interview and obtaining everything needed.

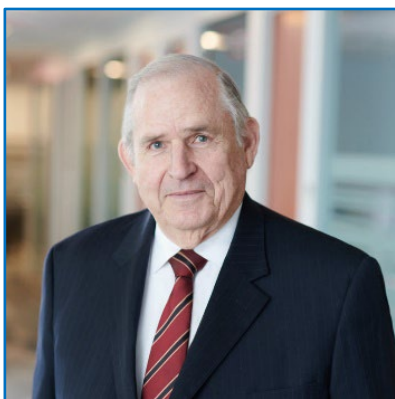
Remain Focused on Facts. The purpose of witness interviews is to establish facts; therefore, it is critical to remain focused on obtaining relevant information. Often those being interviewed try to stray away from what is being asked, especially if they are uncomfortable with the direction of the interview. As such, always follow through on questions asked and not be diverted by other comments. Ensure basic questions such as who, what, where, when, how, and why have been addressed.

Tips for Effective Interviewing

1. Initiating interviews by identifying interviewers.
2. State purpose of the [investigation](#) being conducted.
3. Cite the authority for conducting the inquiry/investigation.
4. Explain why they are being interviewed.
5. Note they have a duty to provide complete and accurate facts.
6. Work to establish rapport.
7. Never intimidate or make threats.
8. Explain you are seeking their cooperation.
9. Ask if they have any questions before the interview begins.
10. Treat those interviewed with dignity, respect, and courtesy.
11. Tell them it is important they be open and candid.
12. Remain quietly professional throughout the process.

13. Remind them they need not fear retaliation for any information they provide.
14. Note their comments will be kept confidential to the degree possible.
15. Request, in turn, for them to keep the interview confidential (“street runs both ways”).
16. Keep control of the interview by asking, not answering questions.
17. Offer no opinions relating to the investigation.
18. Take notes as discretely as possible.
19. Keep questions simple and direct, avoiding compound sentences.
20. Ask open-ended questions and allow the person to answer fully.
21. Use close-ended (yes-no) questions to clarify points.
22. Restate important questions in different ways to ensure no misunderstandings.
23. Inquire if they know of others that might be able to add useful information.
24. As the interview nears the end, read back points to ensure accuracy and completeness.
25. At conclusion, tell them you may be re-interviewed to clarify points.
26. Request they contact you if they can think of anything not covered.

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About the Author

Richard P. Kusserow established Strategic Management Services, LLC, after retiring from being the DHHS Inspector General, and has assisted over 2,000 health care organizations and entities in developing, implementing and assessing compliance programs.