

Tricks of the trade, Part 2: Interviewing postal patrons



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This is the second part of an article about investigating grievances. The first dealt with interviewing postal witnesses; this part offers some tips when interviewing witnesses who are not postal employees.

Stewards have the right to leave the work area to investigate grievances and are allowed a reasonable amount of time on the clock to interview witnesses, including postal patrons, even if the interview is conducted away from the postal facility. However, as postal employees,

stewards are obligated to conduct themselves in a manner that does not reflect negatively on the Postal Service, so interviewing civilian witnesses must be done with care. The following are some things to remember when doing so.

1. They are under no obligation to speak to you. Unlike postal employees, civilians are not obligated to cooperate in a postal or grievance investigation. They can refuse to take your phone call or can slam the door in your face and there is nothing you can do about it. Although many patrons are more than willing to answer questions and may even be anxious to tell you more than you want to know, others are more cautious, even suspicious, and may be reluctant to talk to you.

While postal inspectors and Office of the Inspector General (OIG) agents have a badge they can flash to “encourage” civilians to answer questions or give statements, stewards often have to rely on their skill, personality and wit to get a hesitant non-postal witness to cooperate.

2. Evaluate your witness. Take time to think about each person you want to interview. How you approach that person and the questions you ask will depend on a number of factors:

- Is he or she a potentially friendly witness or has he or she already made damaging statements about the grievant?
- Does he or she have a history of complaining about letter carriers?
- Does he or she see themselves as being adversely affected by what the grievant is accused of doing, or are they sympathetic to the grievant’s situation?
- Does he or she have a history with the grievant, positive or negative?
- Was he or she previously interviewed by postal management, private investigators or the OIG? Has he or she already given a written statement? When? To whom?
- When and where will it be best to interview this person? (At a work site, at home, at a public place, by telephone?)
- Should you show up wearing your postal uniform or will you have a better chance of getting cooperation if you arrive in civilian attire?

- Will you need an interpreter or someone with you to set the witness at ease?

Some of this information can be obtained by asking the grievant or other carriers who may know the witness. It’s to your advantage to find out as much as you can about the witness beforehand.

3. It’s all in the approach. It takes just a quick glance, maybe three seconds, for someone to evaluate you when you meet for the first time. In this short time, the other person forms an opinion about you based on your appearance, your body language, your demeanor, your mannerisms and how you are dressed. These first impressions can be nearly impossible to reverse or undo, making your first encounter with a witness extremely important, as it sets the tone for what follows. Here are some tips to making a good first impression:

- Interview witnesses at their convenience, not yours—Schedule a time when he or she has the fewest competing time demands. The witness has more important ways to be spending his or her time.
- Be punctual—Someone you are meeting for the first time is not interested in your “good excuse” for running late. Plan to arrive a few minutes early and allow flexibility for possible delays in traffic or taking a wrong turn. Arriving a bit early is much better than arriving late, hands down.
- Think before you speak—Decorum, politeness and attentiveness are qualities that seasoned grievance investigators exhibit. Demanding and overbearing individuals can expect little cooperation.
- Be likeable—People are more inclined to be helpful to those persons they like than with those they dislike. Therefore it makes sense to be likeable. Smile.
- Small talk goes a long way—Conversations are based on verbal give and take. It may help you to take a few minutes to learn something about the person you meet for the first time before you get into the actual interview. For instance, how long has he or she lived/ worked there? How does he/she like it? Is there anything or anyone you have in common with the person you are meeting? We are inclined to like those with whom we share similar interests or experiences. Focus on things you have in common.
- Be courteous and attentive—It goes without saying that good manners and polite, attentive and courteous behavior help make a good first impression. In fact, anything less might ruin the one chance you might have at finding the nugget of information that saves someone’s job. To this end, turn off your cell phone. The witness deserves your undivided attention. Anything less and you’ll create a less-than-favorable first impression.

I’ll have more tips on interviewing non-postal witnesses in the next issue.