

More tricks of the trade



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This is Part 3 of an article about investigating grievances. This part contains more tips for stewards when interviewing witnesses who are not postal employees.

Interviews are not interrogations—

An interview should be an informal meeting where the interviewer approaches witnesses on equal terms and encourages their cooperation, allowing them to relate their observations without interruption or intimidation. An interrogation implies

questioning on a formal or authoritative level, such as during an Office of Inspector General (OIG) investigation or a police officer-to-suspect session. Interviews with non-postal witnesses should never have the feel and appearance of being interrogations. If a witness refuses to cooperate in any way, they must not be harassed.

To be or not to be; that is the question—In some situations, wearing your postal uniform and identifying yourself as a union official upfront is a good approach. This works well with those who you know are sympathetic to your grievant or to letter carriers and unions in general. But with others, especially with witnesses who have already provided information to postal officials incriminating your grievant, showing up for the interview in your uniform waving the NALC flag could signal to them that you have already decided they are the enemy and that you are there to trip them up or make them look bad. As a result, they may get defensive, unhelpful or, at worst, refuse to talk to you. A steward may get better results approaching a witness while wearing civilian clothes as a simple “fact-checker” rather than the grievant’s defender.

In many cases, witnesses already may have been interviewed by postal officials, so they may be reluctant to go through it all again. If you downplay the interview as being nothing more than wanting to verify what they’ve already said or clarify a few things to complete the investigation, the witness likely will be more willing and cooperative as they, too, want to be done with it.

Lay the groundwork—In most situations, it’s best to contact witnesses ahead of time to schedule the interview rather than just showing up at their home or workplace and interrupting their day. Start off with a phone call. It might go something like this:

“Hello. Is this Louise Jackson?
Yes it is.

Hello, Ms. Jackson, my name is Jeff Smith. I work for the Springdale Post Office and I have been asked to follow up on an incident involving the mail service to your apartment complex. This concerns mail that was found in the dump-

ster located near the rental office where you work. I believe this happened about three weeks ago. Do you recall that incident?

Yes I do. I already told them everything I know.

Yes. I see here that you were already interviewed, so I don’t want to take up too much of your time; I just need to verify that the other investigators correctly recorded what you told them. That way we can close this file. I’m hoping you can help me out with this; it should only take a few minutes. When would be a good time for me to stop by?

Can’t we just do this over the phone?

Well, I have to come out there anyway to take a few photos for the file, so I was hoping to kill two birds with one stone. It should only take a few minutes. What would be the best time for you?

Well, OK. How about tomorrow at 4 p.m.?

That’ll be perfect. Thank you very much. Let me write this down. I’ll meet you at the rental office at 4 o’clock tomorrow afternoon; is that right?

Right.

Great. See you then.”

Sometimes you may not be able to call ahead. In such cases you still want to approach the witness in a neutral, non-threatening way: “I’m just here to verify some facts, maybe take a few pictures, so I can close this file.”

Do not lie or misrepresent yourself—Telling witnesses that you work for the Postal Service and are following up on an investigation is entirely truthful. There is no requirement that you identify yourself upfront as a union steward representing a grievant. There will be times when doing so is the best approach and there will be other times when you will get more cooperation if you downplay your role. That being said, never misrepresent yourself as something that you specifically are not, such as a manager, postal inspector or OIG agent. If a witness asks you a direct question, never provide a false answer.

Interviewing by telephone—If you are really shy, interviewing by phone offers some advantages over in-person interviews, because the person you are interviewing can’t see your nervousness. You can make use of notes to guide you and help you through the questions.

That being said, phone interviews should be a last resort. When interviewing in person, you have the advantage. The person you are interviewing will find it harder to refuse you in person. Turn on the charm. Project your winning personality. When interviewing one on one, you will have more time to ask questions and witnesses won’t be able to claim they have another call.

I’ll have even more interviewing tips in the next issue.