

Basic Interviewing Skills

Be Brief and To the Point: When you take in complaint information from a complainant, you are, in fact, beginning your investigation's first interview. An intake interview is not a negotiating session, nor is it meant to be therapeutic. It is not a casual or friendly visit. An intake interview is a very specific research project guided by you to answer the basic questions of what, why, where, when, and how something happened.

Be Ready to Listen: Too many Ombudsmen fail in their investigations because they listen poorly. In a complaint intake interview (or any other type of interview, for that matter), it is important to give your full attention to both the content and feeling of what's being said by the complainant.

Before you begin your complaint intake interview, prepare to listen. You need to mentally review all that you know about the issue at hand. This is a good warm-up technique that will allow you to have points of reference for major agreements and/or disagreements between your general understanding and the interviewee's perception of what happened to him or her. After this warm up review, you will be in a better position to ask yourself about relationships and similarities and/or differences between what you know and what you hear as you listen. It will greatly increase your ability to ask clarifying questions. To be sure, pre-planning is less likely to occur for complaint intake interviews, but is an absolute must for all investigatory interviews.

In any interview, you must listen carefully for the interviewee's main statements. You must be able to identify key concepts. Listen for certain important words or phrases that relate to the central issue at hand. For example, in the statement "No, I have not fallen lately", the key word is "lately." This implies that the interviewee has in fact fallen. You must now ask for supporting information, such as: "When did you last fall?" etc.

Begin With an Appropriate Introduction: If the complainant is unclear of your role, tell her who you are and offer an explanation of your function. Tell her what you want to know and why you want to know it.

Be Aware of Possible Biases: Think about who you are talking to and consider possible biases. What are the interviewee's possible motives? Is the interviewee trying to appease, impress or convince you of something? Think about your own biases! This will help you retain your objectivity. Don't let certain words or prejudices used by the interviewee distract you from your task of listening for key points relating to the investigation. Never assume that because a person looks, acts or talks in a manner that is unappealing or contrary to your standards that he has nothing to say! Don't prejudge. Snap judgments on the validity of any given complaint are dangerous.

You should neither completely believe nor disbelieve everything a person tells you unless you have adequate supporting information.

Prepare Specific Questions: Know the dates and names of involved parties-master all background data. Think about the possible sequence of events. Prepare the precise wording of key questions for all interviews except where impracticable, such as during spontaneous complaint in-take interviews. If you are a good interviewer, your questions will be brief and purposeful. You will be doing most the listening, and the interviewee will be doing most of the talking. In fact, if you talk more than one third of the time you are doing something terribly wrong. You should speak only to elicit or guide information, relieve anxiety or clarify possible misunderstandings.

Be Flexible: Although you have prepared the critical questions ahead of time, you need to be flexible and not married to a script. Listen actively, which means you will need to ask necessary clarifying questions.

Eliminate Distractions: Arrange a suitable interview environment. Privacy and comfort are important.

Pay Attention to Body Language: Notice speech inflection, posture, eye contact, body language, gestures, mood and general behavior. The mouth may lie but the body doesn't. Careful observation and attention to non-verbal detail can make a big difference in your interpretation of events.

Expect Hard Mental Work: It is likely that during the interview a great deal of information will be exchanged. It is your task to analyze this data and to separate fact from fiction. You want the good and the bad information. Is the interviewee trying to gloss over certain critical points? It is your job to find out.

Get a Clear Definition of All Unfamiliar Terms: Never pretend you know or understand something when you don't. Ask for clarification of any terms or concepts that are unfamiliar to you.

Know How to Use the Two Basic Forms of a Question: In general, there are two important ways to phrase a question: the direct question and the open ended question. The direct question can be answered briefly with a yes or no or short phrase. It is used for finding out specific information. For example:

Did you work the night of May 16th?

Did you assist Mr. Johnson with his feeding last night? Did

Mr. Jones hit you?

The open-ended question is one that cannot be answered briefly. It allows the interviewee to open up and reveal attitudes, perspectives and reasoning. This sort of question can open up other avenues to pursue or can be used to dig deeper into a particular issue. Open-ended questions can be used to allow the interviewee to justify his action or to challenge his ideas. For example:

Can you tell me what you might do to calm Mr. Jones down when he becomes belligerent? (open-ended, exploratory type of question)

What are some of the problems you routinely encounter in the Alzheimer's wing? (open-ended, exploratory type of question)

What evidence do you have that Mr. Jones is feared by other residents? (open-ended, justifying type of question)

At Clairmont Care Center, they solved a similar problem by omitting the middleman. Would that work here? (open-ended, hypothetical type of question)

What other factors did you explore before restraining Ms. Jones? (open ended, dig-deeper, exploratory type of question)

Summarize Key Points: Near the termination of the interview, summarize the main points and come to a clear understanding of their meaning.

Know When to Stop: Interviews can be tiring, especially on the resident. Don't drag things out. If participants are becoming physically or emotionally tired, you have reached a natural closing point for the interview (adapted from Washington State's training materials).

Keep Good Records: Reconstruct the key facts of the interview as soon as possible after the interview is concluded, while your memory is fresh. Even a short wait can change or distort impressions. If you did not take notes, (note taking can freeze some people right up) this is especially important.

Example of Resident Interview

Ombudsman Kyle Roberts is about to visit New Caledonia Care Center to interview Captain H. W. Bright, a 93 year old resident and early pioneer in the U.S. Air Force's Civil Air Patrol. Captain Bright has Parkinson's disease. The daughter of another resident has taken a special liking to Captain Bright and has registered a complaint with the locally assigned Certified Ombudsman. According to the complainant, Captain Bright is not treated with respect by two of the aides who tease him for wearing his Civil Air Patrol medals and who, the complainant believes, don't offer the type of care which would be appropriate for his condition.

The complainant wished to remain anonymous and offered few details other than she believed the old Captain was generally left alone and not provided adequate assistance.

The Ombudsman arrived at New Caledonia Care Center just after lunch. Kyle showed his identification and caused the administrator to be aware of his presence. He then proceeded to the Captain's room alone. When he arrived there, Kyle knocked on the door and waited until he heard the Captain bid him welcome before asking permission to enter.

Kyle approached the Captain from the front and extended his hand to the Captain as he spoke:

OMB: "Hello Captain, my name is Kyle Roberts and I am from the Ombudsman Program. Your friend Sarah Simpson said you might like to talk to me to discuss any problems you might be having. Did she tell you I would be by to see you?"

Res: "Well, not exactly, she said she was going to talk to somebody from the state, but I don't want any trouble." (At this time, the Captain appears agitated and Kyle is uncertain if his shaking is related to his condition or has been caused by his presence).

OMB: "Don't worry, Captain Bright, my job is to help solve problems before they become trouble. And anything you tell me will be held, by law, in absolute, strict confidence unless you give me express permission to bring it up. You're in control!" (Be honest in your assurance-always avoid false reassurance-be realistic.)

Res: "I don't need any more trouble-you gonna rock (cough, gurgle) the boat?

OMB: "No, an Ombudsman is like a clergyman, lawyer or doctor with both a legal and moral obligation not to reveal confidential information. Also, there are laws against retaliation. You have the right to make a grievance if you wish. But that's up to you. If you want, we can just talk and nobody needs to know anything, if that's what you want."

Res: "Well I don't think you can help me." (The Captain's voice trails off into undistinguishable grunts and coughs.)

OMB: "I am happy to meet you and I have scheduled the afternoon so we can talk in private if you want to. May I sit at the edge of your bed?"

Res: "Sure, go right ahead. I'd like to talk, I guess they're all asleep or down playing bingo or something."

OMB: "Oh I'm sorry, am I interrupting your activity schedule-should I come back later?"

Res: "No (cough)...I...don't partici..part...go to activities (snort) anymore-they're so damn boring! Besides..." (There follows a lengthy and confused explanation in which the Captain talks about what he likes and dislikes and why he's not even asked anymore if he wishes to participate in activities. The Captain becomes increasingly excited and less intelligible as he goes on. Kyle has to ask him to repeat often). The Captain wants to move because "they don't pay much attention to me here. The other day I wet myself", he says with a grimace of disgust, "because those damn kids took so long in answering my call bell. Then they come down here and scold me like I'm a kid."

OMB: "Let me make sure I understand your concerns exactly. First, you don't enjoy group activities, You have made that clear to the activities director but you do enjoy drawing, puzzles and reading. The activity director now essentially ignores you. You would like some more stimulating personal activities. Second, you feel that the staff are sometimes disrespectful. They have scolded you for a situation that wasn't your fault. They salute you and mock you in other ways that are condescending and otherwise inappropriate. Third, staff members are slow to respond to the call bell."

Res: "That it! That's it basically (cough)...! might as well be dead. I just sit and rot."

OMB: "That's terrible. In order to help me understand this situation better I would like to ask you a few more questions. Would it be alright if I took a few notes? These concerns are very disturbing to me and I know I can help."

Res: (The Captain appears to be calmer now) "No... I don't mind."

Kyle continues to ask specific questions dealing with the times, dates, frequencies of events and the other who, what why, when and where issues. After a thorough review of the situation, Kyle asks the Captain what he would like to see happen. Captain Bright responds with a list of desires and expectations that would, as he put it "make things a damn site better." Kyle explains that he considers these problems serious but relatively easy to resolve and assures the Captain that he "will be there to see you through to the resolution."

Questioning Techniques

1. Factual (or "W") Questions

Purpose: To get information.

E.g.: All the "W" questions. Who, What, Why, When?

2. Explanatory Questions

Purpose: To get deeper thinking and analysis.
To get additional facts, reasons, explanations.

E.g.: Just how would this be done?
Is there other information I should have?

3. Leading Questions - Avoid using when talking to residents

Purpose: To introduce a new idea.
To advance a suggestion of your own or another.

E.g.: How about this... as a possible solution?

4. Hypothetical Questions

Purpose: To change the course of the discussion.
To suggest other, perhaps unpopular opinions and points of view.

E.g.: Suppose I suggest this. . . to the staff?
What would happen if you did this. . .?

5. Justifying Questions

Purpose: To challenge ideas.
To get reasoning and proof.
To develop new ideas.

E.g.: Why do you think so?
How do you know?
What evidence do you have?

6. Alternative Questions

Purpose: To make a choice between alternatives.
To get agreement.

E.g.: Would you rather A or B?

7. Coordinating Questions

Purpose: To take action.

E.g.: Is it all right with you if I call your daughter and ask her to. . .?
Do you want me to talk to the administrator about. . .?