

**AFRICAN OMBUDSMAN RESEARCH
CENTRE**

**CONFLICT RESOLUTION AND MANAGEMENT WEBINAR
2 NOVEMBER 2021**

Dealing with Volatile Interviews

By

**Dr Roger Koranteng
Head, Public-Sector Governance
Commonwealth Secretariat
London, UK**



INTRODUCTION

- It's no secret that investigative interviews can be an emotionally charged process.
- To that end, it is not uncommon for individuals who are being interviewed during an investigation can become visibly upset or frustrated.
- And in certain situations individuals can become downright aggressive, hostile or disrespectful towards the investigator.
- The question then arises: how do investigators respond to aggressive or hostile interviewees?

TYPES OF INTERVIEWEES

- Interviewees may range from being very resistant and defiant of the entire process to being overly attentive and concerned.
- Some Interviewees, may honestly need psychological assistance.
- An Interviewee's motivation to be truthful, forth-right, and forthcoming with information may also depend upon the perceived circumstances of the interview.

TO CONCEAL KNOWLEDGE

- Individuals trying to conceal knowledge from interviewers are likely to experience raised levels of stress that can manifest itself across biological, physiological, psychological and behavioural factors, leading to volatile interview.
- Learning to conduct an effective interview is essential to carrying out almost any form of assessment or evidence collection.
- However, the unpredictability of the interviewing process can make interviews a challenging and, at times, even discouraging task.

Aggression in the delivery of evidence

- Given the range of human emotions and dispositions, investigators may encounter interviewees who raise their voice, become extremely agitated, and use an aggressive tone when providing their evidence.
- In some situations, the interviewee may have found the incident under investigation to be traumatic, thereby causing them to become angry when recounting it.
- Their communication style may also be informed by cultural norms, mental health conditions and/or previous life experiences.
- Or perhaps this individual has simply had a bad day and is now irritable during their unfortunately-timed interview.

Manage Expectations At The Outset

- At the beginning of interviews, investigators may find it helpful to explain that, their role is to impartially gather factual evidence regarding specific allegations.
- They may further wish to advise interviewees that they may be asked some difficult, albeit necessary, questions as part of the investigation.
- It may be beneficial to put interviewees on notice that they will be asked to provide a fair level of detail.
- Such a disclaimer can prevent situations where interviewees become defensive or agitated about the number of questions they may be asked.
- Investigators can also consider offering some water, coffee or tea, and engaging in a casual preliminary conversation to put the interviewee at ease.
- Such gestures can help proactively defuse what could become a difficult interview.

DEFENSIVENESS

- The most common complication is interviewee's defensiveness, which prevents the interview from unfolding predictably and straightforwardly.
- Therefore, an adequate understanding of defences is essential for a competent interview.
- If interviewers do not understand defensiveness and how to effectively respond to it, the interview is likely to be, at best, frustrating and, at worst, a pointless enterprise for both participants.

DEFENSIVENESS

- Lack of understanding of defensiveness may elicit irritation, causing interviewer to become more confrontational and forceful in pressing for a straightforward response from the person being interviewed .
- Almost invariably, this approach has the opposite effect, and the situation rapidly grows increasingly unproductive.
- The ability to conduct an efficient and effective interview is arguably one of the most valued skills among investigator.

Role of Investigator (Interviewer)

- Throughout an interview investigators are expected to remain neutral and objective. This entails not assuming to be true, any allegations against an interviewee;
- Investigators should therefore be mindful that they do not unnecessarily police an interviewee's behaviour and impose their own norms about how an interviewee "should" provide evidence.
- However, where an aggressive communication style impacts the investigator's ability to gather the relevant information, there may be a need to refocus and de-escalate the discussion.

INVESTIGATORS MAY WISH TO CONSIDER THE FOLLOWING APPROACHES

- Take breaks where it appears that an interviewee's emotions are impeding their ability to clearly articulate their evidence;
- Acknowledge the interviewee's emotions and refocus the discussion to the allegations at hand.
- Emulate a calm and composed demeanour by ensuring that your own tone and body language is relaxed. This may put your interviewee at ease and neutralize their behaviour.
- Where the interviewee continuously has difficulty providing cogent, relevant information, offer to reschedule the interview.

Aggression towards the investigator

- There may be times where the investigator themselves become the target of aggressive behaviour.
- E.g., interviewees may become angry about the nature of the investigator's questions, criticize their neutrality or respond to their questions in an antagonizing manner.
- While investigation interviews are an undoubtedly stressful process, interviewees are nonetheless expected to behave in a respectful manner.
- To that end, investigators should consider some strategies to deal with aggressive behaviour.

APPROACHES TO ADDRESS AGGRESSIVE BEHAVIOUR

Investigators may wish to consider the following approaches to address aggressive behaviour that is directed towards them:

- Take a break to allow time to cool off for the emotions to subside.
- The most natural thing to do when faced with a difficult person or situation is to react.
- Give yourself time to think and remain focused on identifying the real needs and interests of the other person and yourself.
- Deep breathing and counting to ten is very helpful.

APPROACHES TO ADDRESS AGGRESSIVE BEHAVIOUR

- When resuming the interview, remind the interviewee of your role as an investigator, the nature of the information that you are seeking and the need for the interviewee's cooperation throughout the process;
- Where an interviewee continually interrupts you, advise them that it is important to the process that you do not talk over one another.

APPROACHES TO ADDRESS AGGRESSIVE BEHAVIOUR

- Consider warning an interviewee that if their aggressive or uncooperative behaviour does not stop, you will end the interview. Be prepared to follow through with this warning.
- If it becomes clear that the interviewee is simply unwilling to be respectful or cooperative, advise him/her that you will reschedule your discussion for a later date.
- Consider whether another interview format would be more beneficial in the future (ie, Skype, telephone); and
- Where an interviewee exhibits any sign of physical aggression, end the interview immediately.

Deal with Feelings

- Helping the other person identify or acknowledge their feelings tends to reduce the intensity of those feelings and allows the person to focus on the underlying issues.
- By encouraging and permitting the expression of negative feelings without fear of reprisal or punishment, you have increased the probability that your similar emotional expressions will be better accepted.

Attack the Problem, Not the Person

- Keep an objective eye on the problem and detach any feelings about the person presenting it.
- Try to understand what the actual problem is and generate possibilities for settling it.
- Don't attack the other person and try to see the situation from their point of view.
- If you make assumptions about their behaviour, verify by asking or repeat what you thought you heard.
- Show respect, try not to interrupt, and avoid using hostile words that inflame.

Practice Direct Communication

- Speak directly to the other party. Use “I” statements and be clear about points of agreement, about purpose, and about needs.
- Use body language to show support and attention.
- Ask questions to clarify and paraphrase what the other person is attempting to communicate to you. Ask problem solving questions.
- Other people can provide you with some very important information about yourself, positive and negative, and you can provide equally important information helpful to them.
- Words alone do not convey this information, so be aware of your body language and tone of voice.

Being Empathic

- A fundamental skill for any interviewer is the ability to empathize with interviewee's experiences and convey such empathy through validation and understanding.
- Empathy is the ability to perceive and understand a interviewee's feelings "as if" the interviewer were experiencing them and to communicate that accurate understanding to the interviewee.
- A distinction to be made is that empathy is understanding, not sympathy.
- By responding empathically, the interviewee knows that the interviewer is accepting, understanding, and joining his or her "world" without judgment, rather than just "feeling bad" for the interviewee.

Self-assess

- Investigators should be mindful of their own comfort and well-being. In particular, investigators should take note of their physiological reactions and their ability to focus on the interview.
- When faced with an aggressive interviewee, investigators may become tense, lose concentration or have difficulty taking adequate notes.
- In such circumstances, it may be beneficial to take a break or reschedule the interview to allow for a more productive discussion.

Conclusion

- Investigations interviews can be a frustrating process for all individuals involved.
- However, investigators ought to watch out for situations where simple frustration turns into aggressive, disrespectful or uncooperative behaviour.
- This type of behaviour can negatively impact an investigator's ability to gather the evidence that they need.
- Under such circumstances, investigators are entitled to implement the necessary measures to maintain a safe and respectful interview environment.

Comments & Questions

- Comments

&

?

- Questions

Thanks for your attention