

When Workers Speak, Audit Listens

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Abstract

An ethical trade audit is ultimately about understanding what happens in the workplace, not simply checking whether the required documents are available. Policies tell us what should happen. Management explains how a system is intended to work. Records show what has been documented. A site tour shows what is happening at a particular moment. Workers can tell us what happens in everyday working life.

Worker interviews can reveal how working hours are managed in practice, how supervisors behave when production is under pressure, whether workers feel comfortable raising concerns, whether recorded hours reflect reality and whether workplace procedures are genuinely understood and trusted.

A worker interview is not simply a question-and-answer exercise. Its quality depends on the location, the auditor's behaviour, language, tone, appearance, body language, questioning style and, above all, the worker's perception of whether it is safe to speak. Fear of retaliation, concern about job security, previous experiences, lack of trust, language barriers, peer pressure and concern about being identified can influence what a worker is willing to share.

Keywords: - Worker Interviews; Ethical Trade Audits; Worker Voice; Worker-Centred Auditing; Ethical Auditing; Triangulation; Psychological Safety; Interview Techniques; Active Listening; Worker Trust; Risk Identification; Audit Evidence; Confidentiality & Workplace Reality

1. Why Worker Interviews Matter

Ethical trade audits rely on several sources of evidence. Policies, procedures, records and management explanations are essential, but they do not always tell the whole story.

A factory may have a policy stating that overtime is voluntary. Payroll records may include overtime hours and overtime payments. Management may explain that workers are free to leave at the normal finishing time. A worker may describe a different experience: perhaps workers can technically leave but those who do so regularly lose access to preferred overtime, or a supervisor tells workers that a shipment must be completed before anyone leaves.

The worker interview provides an opportunity to understand that difference. It gives the auditor direct access to workplace experience rather than relying only on management or documented systems.

Worker interviews are not a substitute for other evidence. Strong conclusions normally come from bringing together worker accounts, management interviews, documents, payroll and production records, site observations and other available evidence. That is where triangulation becomes important.

2. Beyond the Checklist

A checklist is useful because it ensures that required topics are covered. It becomes less useful when it

turns the interview into a sequence of yes-or-no questions. A checklist can remind an auditor what needs to be covered; it cannot determine what question should be asked next.

Aspect	Checklist approach	Exploratory / experience-based approach	Practical audit insight
Starting the interview	“Do you work overtime?” Worker: “Yes.”	“Can you tell me about your normal working day?”	Allow the worker to describe actual working patterns rather than simply confirming overtime.
Busy periods	“Is overtime required during busy periods?” Worker: “Sometimes.”	“What happens when there is a large shipment?”	May reveal when and why overtime occurs and provide a lead for further questions.
Last experience	“Is overtime voluntary?” Worker: “Yes.”	“Tell me about the last time you worked overtime.”	A specific experience can establish who requested the overtime, when it happened and what occurred.
Worker choice	“Can workers refuse overtime?”	“What happens if you need to leave at your normal finishing time?”	Helps distinguish formal freedom from how workers experience the situation.
Supervisor involvement	“Does your supervisor ask you to work overtime?”	“Who normally tells you that you need to stay, and how is this communicated?”	May clarify how overtime is requested and whether pressure is involved.
Working hours	“Are working hours recorded?”	“What time did you finish the last time you worked late?”	Creates information that can be compared with time records.
Recording	“Is all overtime recorded?”	“How were the hours recorded when you worked late last week?”	May reveal differences between procedure and actual recording.
Payment	“Are you paid correctly for overtime?”	“How was the overtime you worked last week paid?”	Provides information that can be checked against payroll and payslips.
Grievances	“Do you know the grievance procedure?”	“If you have a problem at work, what would you normally do?”	Tests practical understanding rather than memorisation.
Supervisor behaviour	“Does your supervisor treat workers respectfully?”	“How does your supervisor normally respond when someone makes a mistake?”	Moves from a general opinion to observable behaviour.

Outside work	“Is any production subcontracted?”	“What happens to the bundles when there is more work than the factory can handle?”	May identify a lead requiring further investigation.
Closing	“Is everything okay?”	“Is there anything about working here that you think I should understand better?”	Gives the worker an opportunity to raise something not covered.

A checklist tells you what to ask. Good interviewing helps you understand what the answer means.

3. When Workers do not tell the full Story

A worker may know what is going on in the factory but still do not want to tell the auditor everything. This does not automatically mean the worker is lying.

Silence Does Not Always Mean “Nothing Happened”

Fear of supervisors or contractors, concern about losing overtime or employment, previous bad experiences and anxiety about being identified later can influence what workers are willing to say. The worker may be asking a practical question: “Is it safe for me to say what I really think?”

A guarded answer may therefore be a safer answer rather than a direct lie. A worker may say, “Everything is fine,” “Sometimes we work late, but it is normal,” or “We don't have any problems.” Such answers should neither be automatically accepted as proof that there is no issue nor automatically treated as proof that something is being hidden.

The auditor should consider the circumstances in which the answer was given: Was the interview genuinely private? Was a supervisor or colleague nearby? Did the worker appear comfortable? Was the language appropriate? Had the purpose of the interview been explained? Did the worker believe their comments could later be traced back to them?

A guarded answer is not necessarily a dishonest answer. Sometimes it is simply the answer a worker feels safest giving.

Psychological Factors That May Affect Worker Responses

- Fear of retaliation – concern about employment, overtime, promotion, transfer or treatment after the auditor leaves.
- Fear of being identified – the worker may believe management can identify them even if their name is not recorded.
- Previous experiences – earlier complaints may have produced no change or may have resulted in questioning by management.
- Lack of trust – workers may not yet know whether the auditor is genuinely independent or whether speaking will make a difference.
- Language barriers – technical audit terms may produce short or confused answers that are mistaken for reluctance.
- Peer pressure – workers may be influenced by colleagues when interviews are conducted in groups.

The auditor cannot remove every fear, but can reduce unnecessary fear through privacy, a calm manner, familiar language, patience and careful handling of information.

4. Creating Psychological Safety

The first responsibility of the auditor is to create an environment where the worker can speak without unnecessary fear. This begins with the location, but it continues through the entire interaction.

A sensitive discussion should not take place where a supervisor can hear it. The physical environment should be neutral and comfortable rather than intimidating.

A simple opening can help establish the tone: "I would like to understand your experience of working here. There are no right or wrong answers. I am interested in what normally happens."

Psychological safety is demonstrated through behaviour:

- Listen without judgement.
- Remain calm when unexpected information is raised.
- Allow pauses and do not rush the workers.
- Use familiar language.
- Don't ask rude critical questions.
- Safeguard sensitive information.
- Ensure that whatever worker will inform will be kept confidential & his identity will not be revealed to anyone.
- Do not make promises that cannot be guaranteed.

Does the Auditor's Experience & appearance Matters?

Yes. Workers begin assessing the auditor before the first question is asked. The auditor should appear professional, appropriate and approachable. Dress should be clean, presentable and suitable for the workplace, with safety requirements and PPE taking priority.

An experienced auditor understands that workers begin assessing the auditor before the first question is asked. They may observe the auditor's appearance, manner, tone, body language, confidence and approachability before deciding how comfortable they feel speaking.

An experienced auditor therefore understands that **professionalism is not only about appearance or knowledge of audit requirements. It is also about how the auditor interacts with the worker**

An experienced auditor also understands the importance of physical behaviour. Standing over a seated worker, repeatedly looking at the checklist while the worker is speaking, appearing impatient, interrupting frequently or reacting strongly to an unexpected answer may make the worker more cautious.

A more effective approach is to maintain **appropriate physical distance, an open posture, a calm tone and attentive eye contact**, while respecting cultural and individual differences

A professional & an experienced auditor does not only know what to ask. They understand how to create the right conditions for a worker to answer.

Professionalism is not only about appearance. It is also about how the worker experiences interactionz

5. Connect Before Questioning

The first few minutes can influence the tone of the conversation. A sensitive subject at the very beginning can put a worker on guard.

Start with easy questions like:

"How long have you worked here?"

- "What are you doing?"

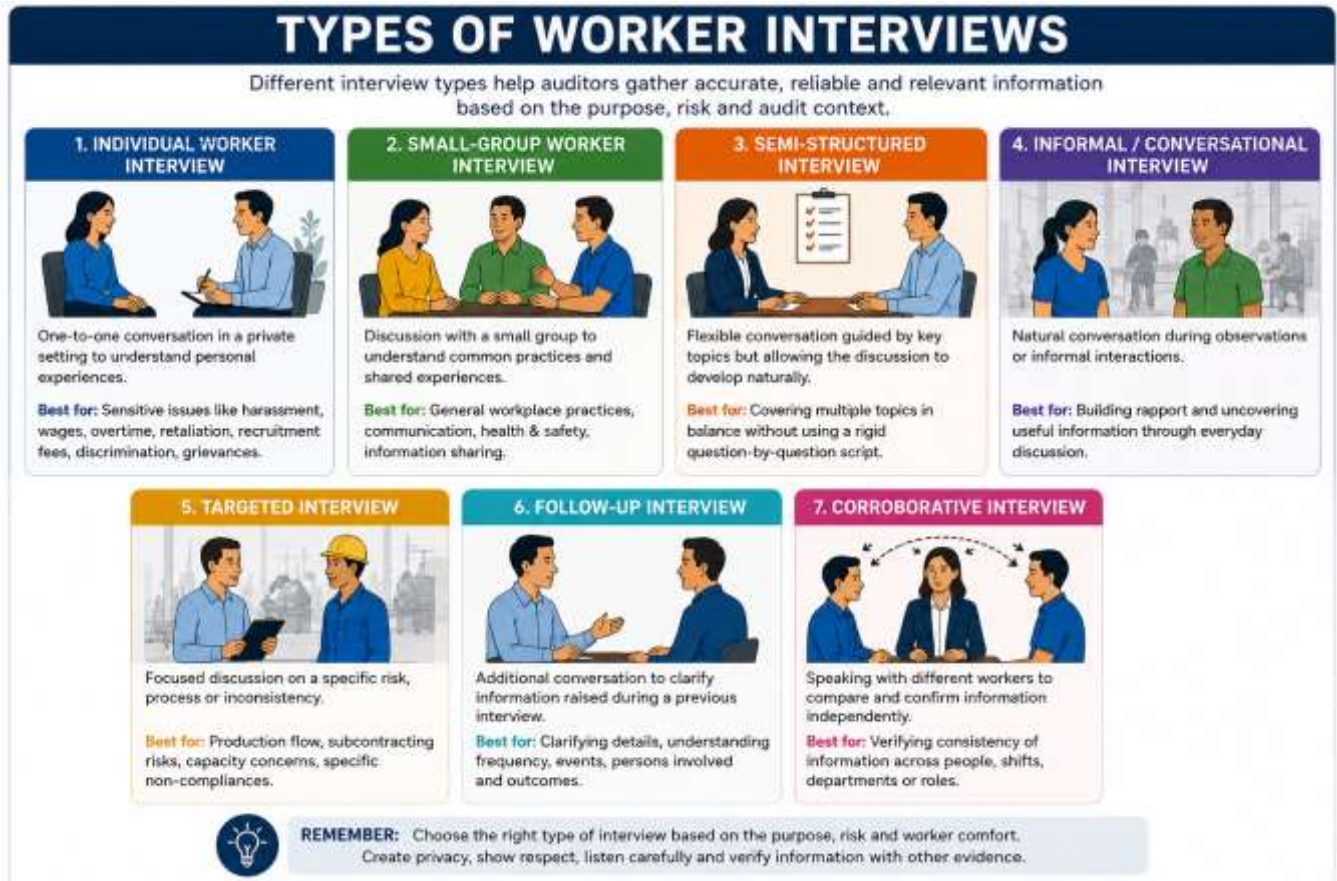
- “What does a normal day at work look like for you?”

These questions provide the worker a chance to hear the auditor's voice, pacing and manner before more sensitive topics are raised.

6. Different Types of Worker Interviews

There is no single format that works for every situation. The format should reflect the purpose of the interview and the sensitivity of the subject.

- Individual interviews – generally best for harassment, discrimination, retaliation, wages, forced overtime, recruitment fees, grievances and supervisor behaviour.
- Small-group interviews – useful for general workplace practices, communication and common procedures, but normally unsuitable for sensitive personal allegations.
- Semi-structured interviews – often the most practical format; the auditor prepares key subjects but allows the conversation to develop naturally.
- Informal conversations – useful for getting a feel for everyday practice and to pick up on unexpected comments that may provide audit leads.
- Targeted interviews – when you need to understand a particular risk or inconsistency.
- Follow-up interviews – when something arises in a previous conversation and needs clarification.
- Corroborative interviews – used to compare accounts independently without telling one worker what another has said.



7. Choosing the Right Interview Location

The location can influence the quality of the information. A production floor may be ideal for understanding a production process but unsuitable for discussing harassment. A private room may be appropriate for a grievance but less useful for understanding how a particular process works.

Location	Best used for	Practical example	Key consideration
Private room	Sensitive and personal subjects	Discussing harassment, grievances, retaliation, wages, working hours or supervisor behaviour.	Ensure the conversation cannot be overheard or influenced by management or supervisors.
Production floor	Actual work processes, material movement and production flow	“Can you tell me how these bundles normally move through the process?”	Use for process-related questions; move sensitive subjects to a private location.
Canteen / break area	General worker experience and informal conversation	“How do workers normally receive information about overtime or leave?”	Ensure reasonable privacy; colleagues may influence responses.
Accommodation	Living conditions, recruitment-related issues and accommodation practices	Discuss accommodation arrangements, deductions or restrictions where relevant.	Access must be appropriate and workers must not feel monitored or pressured.
Off-site	Particularly sensitive concerns	Where permitted, discussing serious concerns away from the immediate workplace.	Must be consistent with the audit methodology and should not create additional risk.
During site tour	Understanding something directly observed	“Where do these bundles normally go?”	Use observations as leads; do not make assumptions or lead the worker.
Exit / gate	Quick, non-sensitive questions, especially working hours	“What time did you finish work today?”	Workers may be in a hurry and privacy may be limited.

The right question asked in the wrong location can produce the wrong answer.

8. Practical Techniques for Worker Interviews

Technique	How it works	Practical example	Audit value / caution
Open-ended questions	Allow the workers to explain in their own words.	Instead of “Do you work overtime?” ask “Can you tell me about your working hours?”	Opens the conversation and reduce yes/no answers. Listen before moving on.
Funnel questioning	Moves from broad context to specific details.	Normal workday → busy day/ periods → last overtime done →	Sets the stage for detailed questions.

		exact or approximate day → start time /finish time → recording/payment	
“Last time” technique	Moves from general statements to a specific recent experience.	“Tell me about the last time you worked overtime.”	Specific events are easier to clarify and compare with records. Do not suggest the answer.
Experience-based questions	Focus on what the worker has experienced or observed.	“Tell me about the last time someone raised a problem.”	Shows how a procedure works in practice. Distinguish personal experience from hearsay.
Timeline technique	Reconstructs an event in sequence.	Production: order → cutting → bundles → movement → stitching → return → finishing → packing.	Helps identify gaps between documented and actual processes. Ask “What happened next?”
Probing	Follows an important answer with neutral follow-up questions.	“When does that happen?” “Who asks you to stay?” “How is it recorded?”	Clarifies circumstances, frequency and process. Probe to understand, not to pressure.
Rephrasing	Changes wording when the worker does not understand.	Instead of “Are you aware of statutory entitlements?” ask “What leave and benefits do you receive?”	Separates lack of knowledge from difficulty with audit terminology.
Scenario questions	Uses a hypothetical situation to understand a process.	“Suppose a worker has a problem with a supervisor. What could that worker do?”	Useful for testing practical awareness. Explore actual experience separately if needed.
Observation-linked questions	Uses something actually observed as the starting point.	Can you tell me where these goods usually go>	May be due to Production Flow. Avoid leading questions such as “These are going to a subcontractor, aren't they?”

Comparative questioning	Ask different workers independently about the same process.	“What normally happens when there is a large shipment?”	Help compare experiences. Do not reveal another worker's response.
Using Pause / silence	Gives time to think and go on.	It is good to pause after asking a sensitive question.	Silence should create space, not pressure.
Listening for small clues	Notices ordinary comments that may indicate an area for further exploration.	Worker: “Sometimes pieces go outside.” Auditor: “Can you tell me about the last time that happened?”	A clue can become an audit lead. A clue is not a finding; verify before concluding.

9. When a Small Comment Becomes an Important Audit Lead

Important information does not always arrive as a clear allegation. It may appear as an ordinary sentence. Words such as “sometimes,” “usually,” “only when,” “some workers” or “we used to” can indicate that the worker is describing a practice that is not obvious from the formal system.

“Sometimes pieces go outside when there is too much work.”

The auditor should not immediately conclude that unauthorised subcontracting exists. Instead, ask: “Can you tell me about the last time that happened?”

If the worker explains that bundles were taken to another location for stitching and later returned, the auditor now has a lead, not a finding.

Evidence to examine	Purpose
Production orders	Understand the production requirement.
Internal production capacity	Consider whether the recorded production could reasonably have been completed internally.
Issue and receipt records	Establish whether materials moved outside were properly recorded.
Gate records	Check whether movement of materials or goods is consistent with the worker's account.
Vehicle movements	Where available, understand movement of production materials.
Subcontracting approvals	Establish whether outside production was authorised.
Payment records	Understand whether and how outside work was paid for.
Other worker interviews	Compare independent accounts of the production process.

A clue is not a finding. Listen, explore, verify and then conclude.

10. Handling Contradictions

Contradictions are a normal part of ethical trade audits. They do not necessarily mean that someone is lying. Different people may describe the same workplace differently because they work on different shifts, in different departments, under different supervisors or during different production periods.

Management: *“Workers normally leave at 5:30 PM.”*

Worker: *“Sometimes we leave at 9 PM.”*

The auditor should not immediately decide who is right. The difference may be explained by different shifts, departments, shipment periods, peak production, worker categories or working arrangements.

Instead of challenging the worker with “Management says workers leave at 5:30. Why are you saying 9?”, use a neutral follow-up: “Can you tell me when workers normally leave at 9?”

Then explore when it happens, how frequently, which department is involved, whether it is linked to shipment periods, who asks workers to stay, how the additional hours are recorded and how they are paid.

CONTRADICTION → EXPLORE → UNDERSTAND → VERIFY → CONCLUDE

Do not use the sequence “Contradiction → Accuse → Conclude.” A contradiction is an invitation to investigate further, not a finding by itself.

Where the difference is explained by context, for example, management was describing the normal working day while the worker was describing peak shipment periods—the auditor can then verify the information against time records, production orders, payroll and other worker interviews.

11. Body Language Is Not a Lie Detector

An auditor may notice that a worker becomes quieter, hesitates, avoids eye contact or looks towards the door. These observations can be useful, but they do not prove dishonesty. The worker may simply be nervous, unfamiliar with the process, worried about being overheard or uncomfortable with the language.

Observe → Explore → Verify, rather than Observe → Assume → Conclude.

If a worker becomes uncomfortable when discussing a supervisor, a neutral response might be: “Would you be comfortable telling me a little more about that?” Avoid “You look nervous. Are you hiding something?”

12. Sensitive Subjects Require Sensitive Questions

The same subject can be approached in different ways. The aim is to understand the worker's experience, not to test their knowledge of audit terminology.

Subject	Less useful / leading	More useful / exploratory
Overtime	“Is overtime voluntary?”	“What happens when you are asked to stay late?” followed by “What happens if you want to leave?”
Grievances	“Do you know the grievance procedure?”	“If you have a problem at work, who would you speak to?” followed by “What happened the last time someone raised a problem?”

Supervisor behaviour	“Does your supervisor harass workers?”	“How do supervisors normally respond when someone makes a mistake?”
Freedom of association	“Do you understand freedom of association?”	“If workers want to raise an issue together, how would they normally do that?”
Benefits	“Are you aware of your statutory entitlements?”	“What leave and benefits do you receive?”

13. Different Workers May Have Different Experiences

A single worker does not necessarily represent the whole workforce. Experiences may differ by department, shift, employment status, length of service, wage arrangement, supervisor, type of work and production period.

For example, one worker may say, “We normally leave at 5:30,” another may say, “During shipment periods we leave at 8,” and a night-shift worker may say, “Sometimes we finish at 10.” These statements may initially look contradictory but may describe different working arrangements.

The auditor's role is to understand why the answers differ and to select workers in a way that provides a balanced picture.

14. Worker's Interviews and Triangulation

The worker interview is one part of the information gathering process. A worker's statement should be taken seriously but in light of the other evidence available.

For example, two workers may independently say that bundles sometimes go outside. Production records may show output that is difficult to reconcile with internal capacity. Gate records may show movement of production materials, while issue and receipt records are absent and management says no subcontracting takes place.

The objective is not to decide immediately who is right. It is to establish what the combined evidence indicates.

Worker interviews + management interviews + documents + site observations + production records + other evidence = stronger audit understanding

Triangulation is strongest when the auditor deliberately compares evidence that comes from different sources and looks for both agreement and unexplained differences.

15. The Auditor's Own Psychology and Bias

Psychology does not apply only to the worker. Auditors also bring assumptions into interviews. A clean facility can create a positive impression. A confident management representative can create reassurance. A nervous worker can create suspicion. A previous audit report can influence expectations. These influences create a risk of confirmation bias—the tendency to notice information that supports what we already believe.

“Am I following the evidence, or am I following my expectation?”

A second useful question is: “What evidence would make me change my mind?” These questions encourage curiosity, balance and objectivity.

16. When the Worker still does not Open Up

Sometimes a worker remains guarded despite a careful approach. Do not force the conversation.

- Slow down and return to ordinary conversation.
- Restate the question or ask same question using different languages.
- Consider whether the location is appropriate.
- Where methodology permits, consider whether another time or setting would be more suitable.
- Look for other evidence.
- Speak with other workers where appropriate.
- Compare information with records and observations.

Most importantly, do not confuse a lack of disclosure with proof that there is no problem. Equally, do not treat a lack of disclosure as proof that there is a problem. Both conclusions go beyond the original facts.

17. Protecting the Worker

The auditor's responsibility does not stop at the interview.

- Explain the goal of the audit in plain, simple local language.
- Careless handling of sensitive information of workers could have repercussions.
- Only gather the information you need. Consider who will be able to see the interview information & take due diligence.
- Do not reveal any information that might identify the source.
- Raise serious concerns through the appropriate process.
- Assure/ Reassure the workers about the confidentiality & explain that any information received during Interview will not be disclosed as individual capacity and share your business card with him so that he can contact the auditor in case of any intimidation by management.

Protecting the worker is part of professional interviewing. The aim is to report the issue accurately while minimising unnecessary exposure of the person who raised it.

Explain to workers that purpose of interview is to understand their experience of working in the factory. There are no correct or incorrect answers. Encourage workers to speak in their own words. Their individual comments will be handled carefully and will not be linked to their name. If in their experience there are any concern because of participating in the interview, ask them to share and inform them to use the contact or reporting process that has been explained.

18. Do's and Don'ts During Worker Interviews

Do	Don't
Create privacy	Interview sensitive subjects near supervisors.
Explain the purpose	Start with accusations.
Use simple language	Use unnecessary audit jargon.
Listen patiently	Interrupt.
Use open questions	Lead the worker.
Allow silence	Rush every pause.
Ask about real experiences	Put words into the worker's mouth.
Explore inconsistencies	Accuse workers of lying.

Observe the environment	Treat body language as proof.
Protect worker identity	Reveal the source unnecessarily.
Verify information	Treat one statement as the final finding.
Remain curious	Assume you already know the answer.
Thank the worker	Make promises you cannot keep.

19. Practical Thumb Rules- Worker Interviews

- Be human first – Treat the worker as a person, not simply as a source of information.
- Create privacy – Remove unnecessary influence from supervisors and management.
- Be professional but approachable – Your appearance and behaviour create the first impression.
- Connect before questioning – Start with normal conversation.
- Speak their language – Use terms they understand not the audit terminology.
- Listen more than you speak – Allow the worker to finish.
- Ask, don't suggest – Do not put the answer into the question.
- Ask about real experiences – Use “Tell me about the last time...” where appropriate.
- Follow small comments – A casual remark may be an important lead.
- Probe without pressure – Understand the facts without interrogating.
- Do not judge nervousness – Behaviour is something to explore, not proof of dishonesty.
- Do not accuse – Explore contradictions.
- Verify – An interview is evidence, not automatically a finding.
- Triangulate – Compare workers, management, records and observations.
- Protect – Handle worker information responsibly.

20. Closing the Interview

The closing part of an interview is often overlooked. Before ending, give the worker an opportunity to raise something that was not covered.

- “Is there anything important about working here that I haven't asked you?”
- “Is there anything you think I should understand better?”
- “If you could change one thing about working here, what would it be?”
- “Is there anything else you would like to tell me?”

Sometimes information emerges at this stage because the worker has gradually become more comfortable during the conversation. Thank the worker and avoid making promises about outcomes that are outside your control. Record Information accurately and objectively and responsibly manage sensitive information.

21. Practical Guidelines for Human-Centered Interviews

CONNECT → LISTEN → EXPLORE → PROBE → CLARIFY → VERIFY → PROTECT

CONNECT – Create comfort and psychological safety before moving into sensitive subjects.

LISTEN – Give the worker time and attention.

EXPLORE – Understand the worker's actual experience rather than simply seeking confirmation of a checklist answer.

PROBE – Follow important information without pressure.

CLARIFY – Establish who, what, when, where and how.

VERIFY – Compare important information with other audit evidence.

PROTECT – Handle worker information responsibly.

22. Final Check for the Auditor

About the worker

- Did the worker appear reasonably comfortable?
- Was the interview free from unnecessary management influence?
- Did the worker understand my questions?
- Did I allow enough time?

About my approach

- Did I listen more than I spoke?
- Did I avoid leading questions?
- Did I remain neutral?
- Did I allow silence?
- Did I avoid making assumptions?

About the information

- Did I obtain specific examples?
- Did I follow important clues?
- Did I explore contradictions?
- Did I distinguish facts from opinions?
- What remains to be verified?

About triangulation

- Does the worker's account align with records?
- Does it align with management information?
- Does it align with site observations?
- Do other workers describe similar practices?
- Is there evidence that contradicts the account?

About protection

- Could the worker be identified from my reporting?
- Have I unnecessarily disclosed the source?
- Have I handled sensitive information appropriately?

Conclusion

Worker interviews should never become a mechanical exercise in completing an audit checklist. Their real value lies in helping the auditor understand what happens behind policies, procedures and records.

A worker may not always tell the full story. That does not automatically mean the worker is dishonest. Fear, lack of trust, concern about retaliation, previous experiences, language, peer pressure and concern about being identified can influence what a worker is willing to say.

The auditor cannot remove every fear, but can reduce unnecessary fear through privacy, respect, appropriate behaviour, familiar language, patience, active listening and careful handling of information. Psychological tools should never be used to manipulate workers. Their purpose is to create an environment in which a worker can make an informed choice to speak.

An experienced auditor learns to notice small comments such as “Sometimes we send pieces outside,” “Sometimes we don't punch out,” or “We don't normally complain.” These statements are not findings by themselves. They are opportunities to ask one more question.

The strongest worker interview is not necessarily the one in which the auditor asks the greatest number of questions. It is the one in which the worker feels sufficiently comfortable to speak, the auditor listens without judgement, important information is explored carefully, contradictions are understood rather than confronted, small clues are followed and the information is tested against the wider body of evidence.

Critical findings do not always begin with a critical statement. Sometimes they begin with a small comment that an attentive auditor chooses not to ignore.

Worker interviews are one important part of the overall audit picture. When worker voice is brought together with management information, documents, site observations and other evidence, the assessment moves beyond the checklist and closer to the reality of the workplace.

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