

# Skills and Competencies for Interviewing Witnesses



**Guidance Note**



# INTRODUCTION

The following note outlines some of the key soft skills and competencies needed for conducting SEAH interviews, whether that be with a survivor, a witness or a Subject of Complaint.

To effectively conduct SEAH investigation interviews, interviewers are required to have a balance of technical and soft skills. The SEAH Investigation Guide walks through the process of interview planning, the PEACE model, and other key aspects of conducting SEAH interviews. However, interviewers must be able to not only plan for the interview and ask key questions, but also be able to build rapport and trust with the interviewee.

This Guidance Note is not intended to provide an exhaustive list of all skills and competencies and does not apply to interviews with children (all people under the age of 18) or vulnerable people. Children should be interviewed by an expert specialised in interviewing minors.

In SEAH investigations, it is best practice to include two investigators, the lead and the co-lead. When deciding on the roles and responsibilities of the lead and co-lead investigators, gender balance should be factored in. At least one of the investigators should have an understanding, and preferably lived experience, of the cultural and social norms of the context where the interviews are taking place.

The soft skills and competencies required by investigators combine communication and critical thinking abilities, which are not always found in the same individual. Where possible, two investigators should be chosen who possess these complementary skills and competencies. The standard role of a lead investigator is to lead the interaction with the witness, whereas the co-investigator takes notes. However, it is critical that the two investigators act as a team. Co-investigators may take

over questioning if the lead Investigator has reached a block, allowing them time to re-orient and prepare a new line of questioning. The co-investigator may also note cues and information missed by the lead investigator that they would like to follow up on. Investigators should agree beforehand how they will work together during the interview.

## SOFT SKILLS & COMPETENCIES

### Emotional intelligence

Emotional intelligence means that you have an awareness of your own emotions and how to control and manage them and an awareness of the emotions of others and how those emotions impact actions. SEAH investigation interviews require that the interviewers remain neutral but, at the same time, demonstrate empathy and build rapport with the interviewee. Interviewers should also recognise that SEAH interviews may elicit emotional responses from interviewees, and interviewers must not allow their own emotions and reactions to show or influence the direction of the interview. Interviewers need to maintain a balance between validating the interviewee's emotions and maintaining a neutral position and posture.

### Effective communication

Effective communication skills are critical in SEAH investigation interviews. Interviewers must be able to relay questions and follow-up inquiries clearly and practice active listening with the interviewee. Some essential elements of effective communication include:

- **Appropriate language, tone, and pace** : Interviewers must **use straightforward language** with interviewees, avoiding technical and complex words to ensure their questions and follow-up are clearly understood. Interviewers **must not be accusatory or offensive in delivering questions or statements**. The interviewer's tone **should not reflect any emotional reaction** and should be steady and intentional. The tone should be consistent, calm, avoid monotone and use a vocal variety. In many cases, the interview may occur in the interviewee's second or third language. Translators may also be part of the interview process, requiring the interviewer to **maintain an appropriate pace** that allows for the translator to be as effective and efficient with the translation as possible.
- **Active listening** : Active listening is a skill that requires the interviewer pay close attention to what the interviewee says and provides non-verbal cues indicating they are listening. These cues could include non-verbal messages such as making eye contact and leaning forward. It could also include verbal cues such as saying, 'please continue', 'mmhmm', and paraphrasing back to the interviewee what she or he said. Interviewers must refrain from providing cues that may sway the interviewee's testimony or being perceived as agreeing with them. **Interviewers must remain neutral in their cues but also let interviewees know that they are actively listening.**
- **Neutral and relaxed body language** : While the language, tone, and pace used by interviewers is important, the body language exhibited also must be considered. Interviewers should strive to maintain neutral and relaxed body language. **The body language must match what the interviewer is saying, be comfortable and fluid, and not be stiff.** Their facial expressions should be relaxed and controlled, making eye contact when appropriate.

## Critical thinking

As part of the interview process, interviewers are required to receive information, analyse it, and seek clarification from interviewees. This means that interviewers need to be able to quickly digest information, think critically about the information received, and develop follow-up questions to clarify any points to ensure the testimony from interviewees is as comprehensive as possible. The ability to think critically and react appropriately with follow-up questions and clarifications, obtaining all information needed helps to mitigate risks related to multiple interviews with the same witness, which should be avoided if possible. Only in exceptional cases should witnesses be interviewed more than once.

Interviewers who are highly skilled critical thinkers can :

- apply logic and make linkages in the responses from interviewees;
- understand the relevance of statements and responses from interviewees;
- know when further clarification is needed from interviewees and create follow-up questions in response, on the spot;
- effectively ask interviewees to elaborate on statements made.

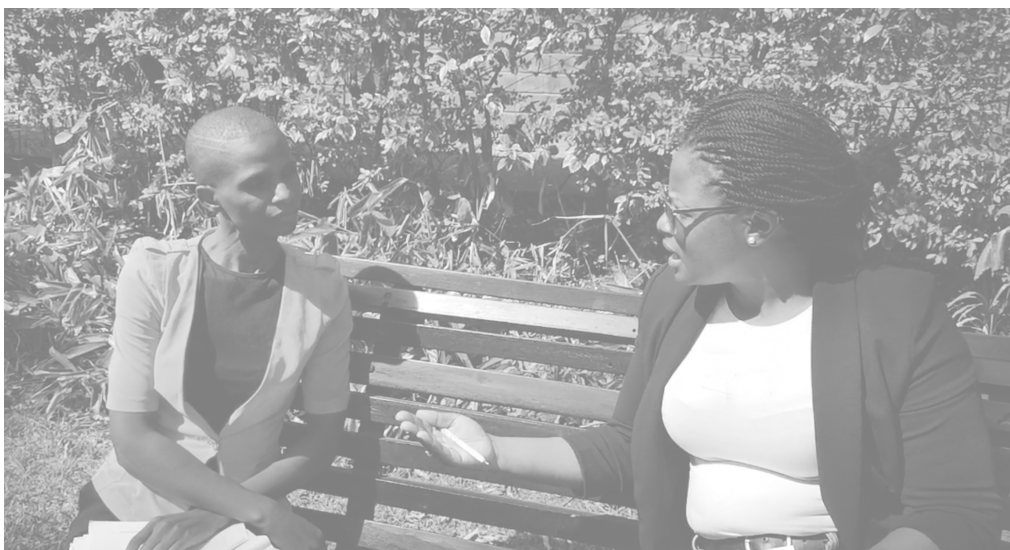


Photo: Participants of the inaugural Tier three Investigations Qualification Training Scheme course, Nairobi, Kenya. CHS Alliance, January 2023

# APPLYING SKILLS & COMPETENCIES IN CHALLENGING INTERVIEWS

## Unexpected information

It is common to receive unexpected information or disclosures in an interview that do not fit with the planned line of questioning or are even shocking or distressing for the interviewer. In these instances, it is important to remain calm, and make decisions on how to follow up on this information. In these instances, it can be **useful for the co-investigator to take over interaction with the witness whilst the lead investigator assimilates the information and decides how to proceed.**

**If the information or disclosure is distressing or traumatic for the witness, it is important to acknowledge this, to validate their experience and show empathy.** When it is appropriate and, if the witness wishes to do so, the interviewers should then follow up on this unexpected information by asking for further details using the methodology from the Account stage of interviewing.

## Dealing with distressed witnesses

It is important that the interview (and wider investigation) process does not cause further trauma to those involved, therefore the interviewers should apply emotional intelligence and empathy in determining to what extent the questioning should be continued. As note, it is important to validate the witness' distress, and allow space in the interview for their emotions and reactions. If the witness is too distressed to proceed, the interview should be concluded. **Evidence gathering should not be prioritised over the witness' wellbeing.**

## Angry or aggressive witnesses

In the first instance, it is important to demonstrate courtesy to all interviewees, including the Subject of Complaint. This may help to diffuse aggression before it arises. If witnesses do display anger or aggression, investigators will require the skills to remain calm but in control of the interview. Investigators should not be drawn into reacting or responding to aggression, but instead should **remind the witness that this is their opportunity to provide evidence that supports their account**, and that aggression is not in their best interests.

If anger or aggression escalates, **investigators should not be put at risk**. The interview should be concluded, and the investigators removed from the situation. If aggression is a possibility in an interview, this should be included in the investigation risk assessment.

## END NOTE :

This Guidance Note is intended to supplement the SEAH Investigation Guide: Recommended Practice for the Humanitarian and Development Sectors (1st Edition, January 2022) for those engaged in the Investigator Qualification Training Scheme (IQTS), developed in collaboration with Humentum.

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