

Confidentiality

When someone reports a Code of Conduct (CoC) [1] violation, they are often in a vulnerable position, fearing retaliation or not being believed. If you can do nothing else to address this report, you must at least guarantee your commitment to confidentiality and refer the reporting part to a Point of Contact.

Make sure to provide:

1. Limited Disclosure

Share information strictly on a need-to-know basis, always obtain explicit consent before involving additional parties, and document who has access to information and why. Explain what will remain confidential, who may need to be informed and when.

2. Secure Information Handling

Protect confidential information by using encrypted communications, storing documents securely and discussing cases only in private settings. Be cautious with "anonymized" details that could identify parties in small communities, for example, "a women working on topic X", "a PhD student with visa limitations".

Active Listening

Active listening is a deliberate process of fully focusing on, understanding, and responding thoughtfully to what someone is communicating [2]. When listening to a CoC violation report, it ensures accurate information understanding and helps reporters feel heard and validated, so

1. Be Fully Present: Choose a private, quiet location, silence devices, close distracting applications, ensure privacy, even in virtual meetings, and allocate sufficient time. Avoid checking your watch, phone, or appearing distracted.

2. Listen Without Judgment: Suspend your assumptions and opinions, avoid expressions of shock or disbelief, refrain from immediate problem-solving, recognize and set aside your biases, and remember your role is to gather information, not judge credibility.

3. Do Not Interrupt: Let speakers finish thoughts completely, resist filling silences (pauses often precede important disclosures), don't challenge or debate their account during initial reporting, and use minimal encouragers like nodding or saying "I understand."

4. Show Empathy: Acknowledge the courage it takes to come forward, validate emotions without dismissing them, use empathetic statements like "That sounds very difficult," and put yourself in their position.

5. Paraphrase and Summarize: Periodically restate what you've heard in your own words, check for accuracy ("Let me make sure I understand correctly..."), summarize key points before moving to new topics, and clarify ambiguities.

6. Ask Open-Ended Questions: Use "how," "what," and "can you tell me more" questions. Avoid yes/no questions that limit responses. For example, use "What happened to you?" rather than "What's wrong with you?"; "How can I support you?" rather than prescribing solutions; "What would help you feel safe?" rather than assuming; "What outcome are you hoping for?" rather than deciding for them.

Moderation

The SCALES Code of Conduct emphasizes recognizing and mitigating power imbalances, especially for ECRs and underrepresented groups [1]. Be aware of power dynamics: senior researchers vs. ECRs, established faculty vs. students, grant holders vs. grant seekers, majority vs. underrepresented groups, and gender imbalances in male-dominated fields.

Strategies: Acknowledge power differentials openly ("The Code of Conduct applies equally to everyone"), center less powerful voices by ensuring ECRs and underrepresented groups feel heard, provide choice about how to proceed, be transparent about limitations, and validate experiences while maintaining procedural fairness.

Conflict De-escalation Techniques

Regulate Your Own Response: Monitor your emotional state and pause if feeling defensive or upset. Take deep breaths, use a calm tone, and maintain open body language.

Validate Emotions: Name observed emotions ("I can see you're frustrated"), normalize responses ("It's understandable you feel this way"), and separate emotion from behavior (emotions are valid; harmful behaviors are not).

Use Grounding Techniques: If someone becomes overwhelmed, suggest a brief break, offer water, ask if they need a moment to compose themselves, remind them they're safe, or check if they want to reschedule.

Set Boundaries: "I want to support you, and I need us to take a brief pause so we can continue productively." If someone becomes verbally aggressive: "I'm here to help, and I need you to speak to me respectfully. Shall we take a break?"

Managing Specific Scenarios

Highly Emotional Reporter: Validate emotions, offer breaks, don't rush or minimize feelings, focus on safety needs.

Reluctant to Provide Details: Reassure about confidentiality, explain why information is needed, give control over pacing ("Take your time, share what you're comfortable with"), don't pressure, offer to continue later.

You Know Both Parties: Acknowledge complexity, be transparent about relationships if appropriate, commit to procedural fairness, consider whether a PoC should handle the case, document your decision-making.

Behavior Seems Minor: Remember impact matters more than intent. What seems minor may be part of a pattern. Take all reports seriously regardless of initial assessment.

Reporter Fears Retaliation: Acknowledge fear as legitimate, explain anti-retaliation provisions, discuss protections, create monitoring plan, provide contact information for support.

Quick Reference Checklist

When Receiving a Report

- Meet in a private, secure location
- Explain your role and the process
- Clarify confidentiality and its limits
- Use active listening: be present, don't interrupt, show empathy
- Take notes with permission
- Paraphrase and summarize to ensure accuracy
- Ask open-ended questions
- Validate emotions without judgment
- Explain next steps clearly
- Ask what support they need
- Provide follow-up timeline

Maintaining Confidentiality

- Share information only with explicit consent
- Use encrypted communication
- Store records securely
- Discuss cases only in private settings
- Be cautious with identifying details
- Document who has access to information

Mediating Potentially Difficult Conversations

- Stay calm and regulated
- Validate emotions
- Offer breaks when needed
- Set gentle boundaries
- Be aware of power dynamics
- Focus on empowerment and choice

References

[1] COST Action CA24139 SCALES. (2024). Code of Conduct of COST Action CA24139 SCALES. <https://camk.pl/SCALES/code-of-conduct.html>

[2] Conflict Resolution Training. Active listening: Definition, techniques, examples (2024).
<https://conflict-resolution-training.com/blog/active-listening/>