A. HAUS KORNERSTONE

WORKPLACE COMPLIANCE

Building Projects That Protect and Develop People

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Where do I go with this

A HYPOTHETICAL SCENE

“I need to tell you something, but I don’t want it getting back to my supervisor.”

The office manager sets aside the folder she’s holding. “Let’s find somewhere we can talk.”

In a small meeting room, the employee describes comments her supervisor has made about her accent. She says it has happened in front of coworkers. Last week, she asked him to stop. Yesterday, it happened again.

“Thank you for telling me,” the office manager says. “I’ll write down what you’ve shared and make sure the person responsible for reviewing concerns receives it today. I’ll limit who I share this with, but some information will need to be shared so it can be looked into.”

The employee looks at her. “Who is that person?”

That question should have an answer.

In a small business or nonprofit, people may know each other well enough to assume they know where to go. Then a concern involves the person they would normally tell. Or they tell someone, hear “I’ll look into it,” and spend the next two weeks wondering whether anything happened.

This is a project you can build around that gap. Create a clear process for receiving a concern, recording it, assigning the next step, and coming back to the person who raised it. For an employee, it gives shape to what may be an uncomfortable decision to speak up. For a manager, it provides something to follow when the conversation catches them by surprise.

Start with the people who will use it

Ask a few employees, “If you had a concern about your supervisor, who would you contact?” Then ask your managers, “What would you do if someone raised that concern with you today?” Write down where the answers differ. Those are the places your project needs to address.

Choose who receives and reviews concerns

Name a primary contact and another contact employees can use when the first person is involved or unavailable. Include a route for concerns about the owner or executive director. A nonprofit might designate a board officer for that role. A small business might arrange for an outside professional to receive and review those reports.

Talk with those people before listing them. Confirm they have time, training, and authority to act, and agree on who covers absences. Put their names, contact details, and roles somewhere employees can find them without asking a supervisor for permission. Explain how an employee can raise a concern in a conversation or in writing.

The EEOC's harassment prevention checklist recommends multiple accessible reporting routes and prompt, thorough, impartial investigations. These are agency recommendations for building a process. [1]

Give managers words to start with

Practice receiving a concern before a real one arrives. One manager can play the employee from the opening scene while another practices listening.

Start with, "Tell me what happened." Ask when and where it occurred, who may have seen or heard it, and whether there are messages or other records to preserve. Ask whether anything needs attention right now so the employee can work safely.

Write down what the employee reports. Distinguish it from what you observed yourself. "Employee reports that the supervisor made this comment at Tuesday's meeting" leaves room to gather the other accounts. Read back the main points and invite corrections.

Explain the next step and when you'll provide an update. Avoid promising an outcome before the facts have been reviewed. Explain who may need the information and why. The EEOC recommends protecting confidentiality as far as possible while conducting a fair investigation. [1]

In my work supporting leaders through employee concerns, I want managers to know what their role is at this point. They can listen, record the concern accurately, and get it to the person equipped to review it.

Put responsibility in the record

Build one short record for each concern. Include the date received, the person who received it, what was reported, any immediate needs, and where supporting records are held. Add the person responsible for the review, the next action, and the next employee update.

Keep the record in a secure place with access limited to people who need it for their work. Assign someone to maintain the records and obtain advice on the retention and access rules that apply to your organization.

In the opening scene, the office manager would send the report to the designated reviewer that day. The reviewer would check for conflicts of interest, preserve relevant information, and decide who should gather the facts. The supervisor named in the concern would have an opportunity to respond as part of that review. An urgent safety issue would receive immediate attention.

Agree on how concerns involving discrimination, harassment, retaliation, pay, or safety will reach the right professional promptly. Make that contact arrangement before you need it. A manager should be able to pick up the phone and know whom to call.

Come back when you said you would

Choose an update time you can meet. You might say, “I’ll contact you by Friday afternoon, even if the review is still underway.” Record that commitment and keep it.

At the end of the review, tell the employee it has concluded and share what you appropriately can about the findings and steps addressing their concern. Explain whom they can contact if the conduct continues or another concern arises.

Arrange a later check-in. Ask, “Has anything happened since we last spoke that you want us to know about?” Pay attention to changes in assignments, schedules, treatment, or access to information.

Federal EEO laws prohibit retaliation for protected activity, including raising discrimination concerns. The EEOC explains that protection can apply even when a person uses ordinary language to describe the concern. [2] Give managers someone to consult before taking action that could punish an employee for speaking up.

Try the process before you announce it

Use the opening scene to walk through your draft with the people responsible for carrying it out.

1. **Follow the first report.** Who receives it? What happens if that person is away or named in the concern? Have someone find the alternate contact using only the information employees will receive.
2. **Complete the record.** Ask a manager to document the scene. Can the reviewer tell what was reported, what needs attention, and when the employee expects an update? Revise any instructions that leave people guessing.
3. **Follow it through to the employee.** Decide who provides updates, records the outcome, and checks back afterward. Ask each person to describe their own next step.

Once you've made those changes, explain the process to employees in a short meeting and provide the written instructions. Give them time to ask questions. Let them know they can raise a concern even if they're unsure what to call it.

After the first month, ask where people got stuck and check whether promised updates happened. Revise the instructions where needed.

A closing reflection

An employee may think about a concern for days before telling you. They may have rehearsed the conversation on the drive to work or decided twice to leave it alone.

A process gives you a way to respond when they finally speak. You can listen without guessing what to do next. You can make a commitment you have the means to keep.

That is how this project develops people. A manager learns to hear a concern without rushing to defend someone. A reviewer learns to separate an account from a finding. A leader learns to check whether the promised follow-up actually happened. Over time, employees have something concrete to judge when deciding whether to bring you the next concern.

Legal scope and official sources

This article is written for U.S. small businesses, nonprofits, and people managers. Its legal discussion addresses federal equal employment opportunity law and EEOC guidance for covered employers. Coverage depends on the law and the employer. State and local requirements need a separate review for the places where employees work.

The reporting contacts, records, practice exercise, and update schedule described here are project recommendations. Have your process reviewed for the laws and any agreements that apply to your organization before adopting it.

Employees can contact enforcement agencies directly. An internal grievance or investigation generally does not extend the deadline for filing an EEOC charge. Include that point when explaining your process. [3]

The following official sources were checked on November 10, 2026.

[1] U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission
Checklists for Employers
Checklist Two covers reporting routes, investigations, confidentiality, corrective action, and retaliation protections. The checklist explains that it offers practical guidance and does not set out legal requirements.
Read the official EEOC source

[2] U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission
Small Business Fact Sheet
Retaliation and Related Issues
Explains protected activity and retaliation under federal EEO laws, with examples for small employers.
Read the official EEOC source

[3] U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission
Time Limits for Filing a Charge
Explains filing deadlines and how internal grievance procedures affect them.
Read the official EEOC source