

Investigation Readiness Checklist

Plus retaliation risk flags to monitor before, during, and after

A defensible investigation is decided in the first hours, not the last. This checklist covers what a clean process looks like from intake to closure, followed by the retaliation warning signs worth watching once someone has come forward. Use it as a working template and adapt it to your jurisdiction and policies. It is a practical aid, not legal advice.

A defensible investigation, end to end



Five stages of a defensible investigation. Each one builds on a clean handoff from the last.

Before you start

Decide three things at intake, which shape everything after. First, who owns this matter and whether a conflict requires someone outside the usual chain. Second, whether privilege should attach and how you will protect it. Third, how sensitive the matter is and who genuinely needs to know.

1. Intake and triage

	The concern is logged with date received, source, and a neutral summary of the allegation.
	Severity and urgency are assessed, with any safety or imminent-harm issue escalated immediately.
	A conflict check is run so no one investigates their own conduct or their own chain.
	A decision is made and documented on whether privilege applies and who directs the work.
	Confidentiality expectations are set with everyone who touches the matter.
	The reporter receives prompt acknowledgment and a realistic sense of what happens next.
	Any duty to preserve documents or data is triggered and a hold is issued where needed.

2. Planning

	The scope is defined in writing, covering the specific allegations and the period in question.
	An investigation plan lists witnesses, documents, and the order of steps.
	The investigator is trained, neutral, and credible to the people involved.
	Interim measures are considered, such as separation of parties, without prejudging the outcome.
	A communication plan names who will be told what, and when, on a need-to-know basis.
	Relevant policies, contracts, and prior related reports are gathered before interviews begin.

3. Gathering evidence

	Documents and data are collected before memories fade and before interviews tip people off.
	Interviews move from least to most involved where possible, ending with the respondent.
	Each interview opens with confidentiality, non-retaliation, and an honesty expectation.
	Notes capture what was said rather than the investigator's conclusions.
	The respondent gets a fair chance to respond to the specific allegations against them.
	Credibility is assessed on corroboration, consistency, and motive rather than impression alone.

4. Findings and closure

	Findings rest on the evidence and apply a consistent standard of proof.
	The report separates fact from analysis and states what was and was not substantiated.
	Recommended actions are proportionate and consistent with how similar matters were handled.
	The reporter is informed of the outcome to the extent allowed, closing the loop.
	Records are retained and secured per your retention schedule and any legal hold.
	Root causes are noted so the same issue is less likely to recur.
	The matter feeds into trend reporting reviewed by leadership.

Retaliation risk flags

Most retaliation is quiet. It rarely looks like a firing and often looks like a slow withdrawal of opportunity. Watch the reporter, and anyone seen as connected to them, for these patterns in the weeks and months after a report.

Category	Warning signs to monitor
Job and role	Sudden shift in duties, removal from projects, exclusion from meetings, or a quiet reduction in scope without a clear business reason.
Performance record	A first-ever negative review, a moved goalpost, or new documentation of problems that were not raised before the report.
Access and visibility	Loss of access to systems, information, or decision-makers, or being left off communications they used to be part of.
Social and team	Cold-shouldering, being talked about, or isolation that begins shortly after the report becomes known.
Schedule and conditions	Unfavorable shifts, denied flexibility once granted, or relocation framed as routine but timed suspiciously.
Career path	A stalled promotion, a withdrawn opportunity, or being passed over in a way that breaks from past pattern.

A simple monitoring habit

Set a reminder to check in at thirty, sixty, and ninety days after a report. Compare the reporter's situation to where they stood before. If anything on the list above appears, document it, ask why, and treat the explanation with the same rigor you would apply to the original concern.

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If you would like help putting this into practice in your organization, I would be glad to talk.

Schedule a consultation today with me at sana.manjeshwar@ombudsana.com