

How HR Can Earn Employee Trust



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Every box and line in the tools is fillable. Complete them in any PDF reader and save a copy for your records.

“HR is not your friend.”

It’s a phrase HR professionals hear. When an employee brings a concern to HR, the employee may want someone in their corner. HR works for the employer and has to respond within that role. Trust grows when HR explains that honestly, handles the matter consistently, and tells the employee where things stand afterward. This toolkit gives practitioners three ways to check whether their reporting process does what it says it will do.

The data points to the front end of the process, before any investigation starts. In January 2026, HR Acuity surveyed 2,043 U.S. employees about their workplace experiences in 2025. Among employees who experienced or witnessed misconduct, **22%** did not report it. Reporting rates varied by employee level: **63%** for hourly workers compared with **97%** for executives. Only **56%** of employees were aware of an anonymous reporting option. These findings give HR useful questions to ask about its own reporting process, but they do not explain why employees in your organization may choose not to report a concern.

Start with the Reporting Gap Audit to see who brings concerns forward and where information may be missing. The Promise Inventory then compares what employees hear with what HR can actually deliver, and the Loop Closing Standard assigns someone to explain the process, give updates and follow through at closure.

01 Reporting Gap Audit

Choose a time period and one grouping: employee level, tenure, department, shift or location. Review concerns that reached HR, managers, a hotline or another reporting channel. Note any missing records before drawing conclusions.

Set up the review

TOOL 1

REVIEW ITEM	DETAILS
Time period	
How you are grouping employees, such as by shift, tenure or department	
Reporting channels reviewed	
Channels or records you could not review (for example, informal conversations that supervisors did not document)	

Count the reports

List each group and the number of concerns it raised across every channel you reviewed. No calculations are needed.

Consider how many employees are in each group when reviewing the counts. A smaller group may naturally have fewer reports. If the same employee raised the same concern through more than one channel, count it once. If you cannot identify duplicate reports, note that limitation. Low reporting alone does not establish a lack of trust.

GROUP	CONCERNS RECEIVED (ALL CHANNELS)

What do you notice?

Look for groups you seldom hear from, concerns that go to managers but do not reach HR, and employees who stop hearing from HR after making a report. Use broad descriptions. Do not put names or case details in this worksheet.

Review one group

TOOL 3

QUESTION	NOTES
Which group are you looking at?	
Where have concerns from this group been raised?	
How many concerns from this group bypassed the reporting channels set out in policy?	
If your organization offers anonymous reporting, do employees in this group know how to use it? How do you know?	
What stands out about how concerns were reported or handled?	
What else could explain what you are seeing?	
What will you check next, who will do it, and by when?	

A quiet group may have few concerns, use another channel, or have trouble reaching HR. Check access to reporting channels, onboarding, manager practices, employee feedback and whether employees receive a response. If a group is small enough that a count could point to a specific person, combine it with a neighboring group before you record anything.

“ FROM COUNSEL

Abby J. Clark said of low reporting, “That isn’t a metric I personally would find concerning.” Tom Luetkemeyer identified employees routinely bypassing the reporting channels set out in the organization’s policy as a warning sign. He suggested that additional education about HR’s role, available services and how to access them may help address the concern. The useful question is where people go with a concern and what happens after they speak up.

Promise Inventory

Put the actual words employees hear next to what your process can deliver. Pull language from policies, reporting forms, hotline scripts, manager training, acknowledgment messages and the explanations HR gives in conversation. An implication can create an expectation even when nobody intended to make a promise. Use the topics below as examples to check, then complete the worksheet for each promise you find.

TOPIC	WHAT EMPLOYEES MAY INFER	WHAT TO VERIFY AND DECIDE
Confidentiality	"This stays between us."	Who may need information to respond? What may have to be disclosed? Replace absolute promises with an accurate explanation of sharing.
Role and impartiality	"HR is on my side" or "HR is neutral."	Who makes decisions? Who collects facts? How are conflicts handled? Explain HR's role, how information will be reviewed and how conflicts of interest will be addressed.
Process	"Every complaint gets a full investigation."	Which concerns call for fact finding, coaching, referral, immediate correction or another route? Who triages them?
Timing	"We will resolve this quickly."	What can be acknowledged promptly? What affects duration? How will delays be communicated?
Outcome and disclosure	"You will know what happened to the other person."	What can be shared about a conclusion, corrective steps or personnel action? What must remain private?
Follow-up	"We will keep you updated."	Who owns updates, how often, and how are missed targets escalated?
Protection from retaliation	"Nothing bad can happen after you report."	How are retaliation concerns raised, monitored and addressed? Promise a response to retaliation, since HR can't control every coworker's behavior.

Promise worksheet

TOOL 4

For each statement, record the exact words and where they appear, what an employee might expect, what actually happens, and who will make any needed change by when. Test replacement language against a real recent matter without identifying the employee.

EXACT WORDS AND SOURCE	EMPLOYEE EXPECTATION	ACTUAL PRACTICE OR LIMIT	CHANGE, OWNER, AND DUE DATE
<i>Example: "Everything you tell me is confidential." (manager training deck)</i>	<i>No one, including the person I named, will hear what I said.</i>	<i>The named employee and two witnesses are interviewed, and allegations are shared as needed to investigate.</i>	<i>Replace with approved intake language; HR business partner; before the next manager training</i>

“ FROM COUNSEL

“Never predict an outcome or make a promise on which you cannot deliver,” Luetkemeyer advised. He pointed out that absolute confidentiality is one promise HR may be unable to keep during a harassment investigation. He also cautioned against promising a full investigation before assessing what the concern requires. Clark said she sees this confidentiality gap only occasionally, but she has seen “a disconnect between the employee’s expectation of confidentiality and HR’s responsibility to respond and investigate.” A review may require HR to discuss the allegations with others. What counts is what the employee reasonably takes away from the conversation, not just what the handbook says.

First, look at statements that sound absolute or could influence an employee’s decision to report or not report. “This stays between us,” for example, should be replaced with an explanation of who may need information and why. Compare that explanation with what your organization actually does. Check revised language with counsel when it involves legally protected complaints, disclosure obligations or local rules. Then make sure managers and intake staff give employees the same explanation they will find in the written policy.

Rewrite it

Swap absolute promises for language HR can keep. Adapt these to your process and check them with counsel before they go into a policy or script.

INSTEAD OF		TRY
"This stays between us."	→	"I may need to share information with others to address your concern. Let's talk about who may need to be involved and why."
"HR is on your side."	→	"My role is to help the organization respond to your concern. I'll listen to what happened, explain the next steps and keep you updated."
"We'll resolve this quickly."	→	"I don't know yet how long this will take. I'll check back with you by [date], even if I don't have an answer yet."
"You'll find out what happened to them."	→	"I'll let you know when the review is complete and talk through what happens next. However, I may not be able to share details about another employee."
"Nothing bad will happen to you for reporting."	→	"Retaliation is prohibited. If you believe it is happening, contact [person or reporting channel] so we can address it."

Loop Closing Standard

HRinsidr note: For concerns that involve safety or potential legal exposure, see our toolkit “[When an Employee Becomes a Legal Threat](#).”

When an employee raises a concern, name one person to keep in touch with the employee, plus a backup. The owner explains what happens next, makes contact when promised, and tells the employee when the review has reached a stopping point. Triage urgent matters and safety concerns immediately.

The timing below is a sample internal standard. Choose targets your team can meet and adjust them for the concern, your policies and applicable requirements. These day counts are examples, not universal legal deadlines. Check whether applicable law, a collective bargaining agreement or your organization's policies require a different timeline, and adjust your process accordingly.

WHEN	SAMPLE TARGET	WHAT THE COMMUNICATION OWNER DOES
Acknowledge	Within 2 business days after receiving the concern, when contact is possible	Confirm receipt, give the employee a contact person and set the next contact date.
Explain next steps	Within 5 business days after receiving the concern	Describe the likely process, who may need information and what HR may be unable to share.
Give an update	Every 7 calendar days, or on an agreed date	Say whether the matter is still being reviewed and give the next contact date. Do not predict a result.
If timing changes	Before the promised contact date	Tell the employee the date has changed and give a new contact date.
Close the loop	Within 3 business days after a decision, when contact is possible	Say that the review is complete or explain another stopping point. Share what you can, explain any next step for the employee and where to raise new concerns.
Check in later	About 30 days after closure, when appropriate	Ask whether the concern has recurred or the employee has experienced possible retaliation.

Say it this way

Acknowledge: “I’ve received your concern, and I’m the person you’ll hear from while it’s reviewed. I’ll be back in touch by [date] to walk you through what happens next.”

Update: “The review is still in progress. I don’t have an outcome to share yet, and I’ll check in again by [date].”

Date change: “I told you I’d have an update by [date], and I need more time. I’ll be in touch again by [new date].”

Keep the commitment

TOOL 5

Communication owner:

Backup:

Next promised contact date:

Record each contact, a changed date and the closure message in your existing case record. If the owner is unavailable, the backup takes over the next promised contact.

“ FROM COUNSEL

“Most employees haven’t contemplated the nuts and bolts of what happens after they make a complaint,” Clark observed. Luetkemeyer emphasized “following through on commitments and keeping the employee informed on progress if the investigation process is taking longer than expected.”

The employee can hear that a review is complete without receiving another person’s private employment details. At closure, explain what you can share and how to report new information or concerns about retaliation. As Clark put it, “Even when the answer is ‘no,’ employees appreciate being treated thoughtfully and with dignity.”

For example: “Our review is complete. Here is what I can share about the outcome: [appropriate information]. Please contact me if the concern continues or you have a new concern about retaliation.”

Spot-check your last five

TOOL 6

Review your five most recently closed matters, or all available matters if you have fewer than five. Use case numbers, not names. Mark Y or N in each column. Use N/A if a step did not apply, and “Not yet due” if the planned check-in date has not arrived. Briefly note the reason for any N/A response.

MATTER (CASE NO.)	ACKNOWLEDGED WITHIN TARGET?	UPDATES ON SCHEDULE?	CLOSURE MESSAGE SENT?	CHECK-IN DONE?
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(				
(				
(				
(				

N/A reasons:

This toolkit provides general information and is not legal advice. Consult employment counsel about your organization’s specific obligations.
Source: HR Acuity. 2025 Workplace Harassment and Misconduct Statistics: Four Gaps that Prevent Employees from Speaking Up. May 2026. Survey of 2,043 U.S. employees, conducted in January 2026 about their experiences in 2025.