

Rallying the Troops with Fun



He's no good,
he won't do what he should



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he won't do what he should



No good, no good,
now he's through!

This James Brown style parody was the grand finale in a skit based on the “reality television” show *The Apprentice* that was recently performed at a union conference. After evaluating the boss’s performance, the entire audience of union members got to yell “You’re fired!” and the union chorus broke into song, complete with “air” trombones and guitars.

Sounds like fun. But what does it have to do with the workplace problems faced by shop stewards? More than you might think.

Satirical skits are a great tool for anticipating management strategies and helping workers gain the confidence to challenge injustices on the job. It can be very empowering to have a chance to portray a supervisor who has been on your back for years and to make him or her look ridiculous.

If you’re looking for ways to increase membership involvement and generate some enthusiasm at meetings, consider trying a skit with a game show format, such as “Who Wants to Be a Million-Member Organizer?” starring Regis Fill-Your-Pockets. Teams have to answer questions about their union and workplace issues, such as “On the average, how much more do union members earn in a week than non-union workers?” Or you can do a bit of research and come up with a question about your company’s profit margin or the CEO’s paycheck. Contestants can, of course, use their “life-

line” and consult other members if they are unsure of an answer.

You can even add commercials: the Energizer Bunny can appear, for example, and announce, “The union keeps growing and growing and growing.”

With a little imagination, you can come up with a skit to fit just about any situation.

Another example: “I know just the company for us. They’ll save us money and they’ll suck the blood out of the union. Let me introduce . . . CONTRACTULA!” So entered union-buster “Contractula” in a skit written and performed by a group of union stewards and officers from the American Federation of Teachers. They wanted to demonstrate the impact of contracting out union jobs to non-union companies. By the time Contractula and his vampire chorus had finished their “Union Busters” rap (to the tune of “Ghost Busters”), there wasn’t a member in the room who didn’t understand the issue or anyone who would forget about it any time soon.

One important function of a union steward is helping members understand their contract. Finding creative ways to present your material is often key to generating interest and excitement. There are few union events that couldn’t benefit from an injection of pizzazz.

Skits That are Hits

Remember these principles when creating and casting a skit:

1 Base your skit on an experience that is common to your audience. The supervisors who are the most notoriously unfair can be turned into characters like Bosszilla, Boss Hogg or Bozo Boss.

2 Exaggerate! Take an issue or situation that’s outrageous to begin with

and carry it to the extreme. One group of poultry workers wanted to satirize a “bathroom study” that management was conducting to determine how much time each employee spent there. This seemed so outrageous already that at first they couldn’t see how to exaggerate it. They finally came up with a “home bathroom study” for their skit, in which management came to workers’ homes to monitor bathroom use.

3 Put forth some type of solution or action the union is taking.

In one production “Captain Solidarity” arrived on the scene (complete with his own tape-recorded theme song) to help union members organize to solve their problems.

4 You don’t need fancy props and costumes.

You can make signs to identify characters or scenes, or make your action revolve around one central prop. One group drew a computer screen on a large cardboard box, put the box on someone’s head, and came up with a talking computer that had some great dialogue with the computer operators.

5 Why not come up with a song to go with your skit?

The easiest way to do this is to write new words to a tune that everyone already knows. Christmas carols, children’s songs, gospel tunes, popular songs anything goes. But pick a song and musical that your particular membership can identify with.

6 Make it easy for people to participate.

Write out the script and let players read their lines if they’re not comfortable memorizing their parts. The key is to have fun.

If you want to use current hit songs and don’t have musicians available, check out one of the many karaoke websites (just type “karaoke” into a search engine) and pick up a cassette or CD of the background track of your favorite song.

— Julie McCall. The writer, a long-time union activist, works with the Labor Heritage Foundation, an organization of labor musicians, artists and writers, at 888 16th St. NW, Suite 680, Washington, D.C. 20006; 202-974-8041; www.laborheritage.org.

One-on-One Recruiting

In some workplaces, every new employee must automatically become a member of the union. In others, though, new members have to be signed up, one at a time. This difficult and frustrating task usually falls to the steward. Experienced hands have found many ways to make the job easier, however, so keep reading: some of these tips may help you sign up even the most reluctant nonmember.

Identify the Worker's Issue(s):

Most workers don't initially join the union because they believe in "the cause." Rather, they join because they think that the union can do something for them — win a pay raise, resolve a grievance, obtain a new workplace benefit, help pass legislation that will improve their lives and that of their families, or win some other right or benefit. So, when talking to a nonmember about joining, the first thing you should do is find what they care about that the union can do something about.

How do we do this? By asking questions. You can start by asking an open-ended question like "How are things going on the job?" Perhaps ask someone what they think about specific issues that other workers have shown an interest in or that the union is already dealing with. You could say something like "Some of our co-workers have said they are concerned with the new starting times management is trying to impose (or the daycare subsidy the union is negotiating, or the contracting out or outsourcing that seems to be coming). What do you think?" If they don't care about one issue, keep asking until you find something they do care about. And when they start talking, shut up and listen. Most of us talk too much. Let the worker tell you what he or she cares about.

Make the Connection Between Issues and Membership

Let the nonmember know what the union is doing or can do about the issue.

If you don't know, check with one of your local officers to find out. There is nothing wrong with not knowing something, as long as you follow up and get the information back to the worker.

Then explain that for the union to be successful on the worker's issue, we need higher membership. Say that management (or, in the public sector, management and the politicians) knows how many workers belong to the union, and we will have more respect and power if more workers join. Tell the nonmember that if he or she joins, there is a better chance of winning. There really *is* strength in numbers.

Deal with Objections to Joining

It's just about here that the nonmember usually says, "That all sounds good, but..." and gives the excuses that you have heard too often for not joining: "I can't afford the dues," "The union is only for troublemakers," "I'll wait and see how the union does on my issues," "If the union wins, I'll join," and so forth.

At this time it is often necessary to bite your tongue (because you feel like calling the non-joiner a cheap scab), and say something like "I understand your concern, but have you thought about ..."

For help in how to answer these objections, talk to your local leaders, and/or look at the box below for answers given to two commonly heard objections.

Give the Worker an Application

Sounds pretty obvious. But so many of us will talk to a nonmember about a grievance or other issue and not ask him or her to join the union. Nobody likes rejection and many of us take it personally when a worker says no. But their refusal to join is not a reflection on you, it only means that we have not yet found the hook to get them to sign on the dotted line.

Follow Up

Most nonmembers don't join the first time they're asked to join the union — it takes persistence. Be ready to ask them again in a couple of days or weeks. Use the opportunity of an article published in the union newsletter on their issue, or in the local newspaper, or on a website to talk to the nonmember again about joining. Ask your local leaders about resources on the issue available from your international or national union or elsewhere in the labor movement that you can use to approach the nonmember again.

Answers to Two Commonly Heard Objections to Joining the Union

Objection: "I can't afford the dues."

Answer: "I understand your concern about your finances. Money is tight for all of us. But the union fights for pay increases and other benefits that save us money (be specific, check with your local leaders for details). The more members we have, the greater chance we have in winning these fights by showing that we are united. And that means a better financial future for all of us." You also might mention the members-only discount programs that your union offers.

Objection: "The union is only for troublemakers."

Answer: "It might seem like that sometimes. But most of what the union does, from negotiating better working conditions in the contract, to lobbying politicians for legislation that helps working families, benefits us all, including the majority of workers who don't have individual problems. And consider this: If a murderer can have his or her day in court, shouldn't someone who is accused of coming to work late have the right to appeal?"

Discipline for Poor Performance

Either you perform up to expectations, or you're out the door! Well, that sounds good to management, but reality is something else in a unionized environment. More often than not, according to a review of recent arbitration decisions, if the union concludes the employee was treated unjustly, the arbitrator agrees. Disciplining or terminating an employee for poor performance must be done properly, or the worker goes back on the job. Bear in mind, of course, that union leadership needs to review each case and decide whether to take it to the arbitration step.

Here are a few sample cases:

Requested Demotion

A manufacturing worker was discharged for performing poorly and creating excess scrap. The arbitrator put her back on the job because she had requested demotion to a less demanding job 19 months earlier. It wasn't granted because a replacement couldn't be found. She was not given help to improve her performance, and the fact that her request for demotion 19 months earlier was not acted upon did not justify discipline for "just cause."

Expensive Mistakes

A machine operator was fired for "carelessness in failing to properly set up tool in lathe." The incident resulted in a machine being down for 8 days and lost production costing \$760,000. The arbitrator reduced the penalty to a 28-day suspension because the worker had not done the work before and it was a first disciplinary offense. But carelessness in setting up the machine was the fault of the worker, justifying the suspension, the arbitrator said.

Another worker was working on a component, made a mistake that led to a loss of \$215,000, and was fired. In this case, the arbitrator upheld the discharge because the employee was negligent,

which led to scraping of the product, even though there was a high scrap rate in conjunction with the company's production. Because the cost of scrapping was so high, the employer was justified in not following progressive discipline, the arbitrator said.

Extended Probationary Period

A city government terminated a worker after unsuccessfully trying to extend his probationary period. The arbitrator put him back to work, because the agreement required 60-day reviews during probationary periods. The city did not provide the required reviews, and the employee was never told his work was unsatisfactory.

Not Cleaning Up Fast Enough

A nurse in a health care center was suspended "for failing to promptly clean up after an incontinent patient." The arbitrator reversed the suspension, noting that the time lapse before cleanup was 15 to 30 minutes, not the hour alleged by the patient; suspension was not timely because there were mitigating circumstances including inadequate staffing, and there may have been confusion as to who was responsible for the cleanup. And further, the nurse's prior disciplines did not provide just cause: one cited discipline was 10 years old and the other was a simple verbal warning.

Refused to Answer Questions

A state employee was fired for refusing to answer questions during an investigation in which the agency claimed to show that the employee had "failed to act with good behavior and was insubordinate." The arbitrator put the worker back to work, because the agency rules provided that removal from the job was appropriate only "where grievant's conduct endangers life, property or public safety." None of those issues was in play in the dispute.

Released the Wrong Body

A hospital security guard released the wrong body to a funeral home and was fired. The arbitrator reduced the penalty to a five-day suspension, stating that hospital policy did not list the offense as grounds for termination, the action could not be characterized as "grossly negligent or willful," and the suspension was more in tune with a "negligent but not willful" level of violation stated in the rules.

Last Chance

Are arbitrators sometimes soft-hearted? The following case illustrates: An employee who had made numerous errors was finally fired. The arbitrator ruled the company didn't have just cause and put him back on the job, but without back pay and on a last-chance basis. He felt the employee faced extenuating circumstances involving disability and harassment on the job, and besides, he was a long-service employee.

Points to Remember

In handling cases revolving around charges of poor performance, these are things to watch out for:

- n Read the employer rules carefully to make sure that the penalty applied was appropriate to the crime.
- n Generally, a single example of poor performance does not justify discharge, even when the error is very expensive to the employer.
- n Make sure management followed due process, investigated carefully, and was able to prove the employee's performance was the problem.
- n The burden of proof is always on the employer in disciplines for poor work performance.
- n Make sure the employee was duly notified that he or she had a performance problem, and ensure the person had some training or retraining to overcome the problem.
- n Look for extenuating circumstances that might justify giving the worker another chance or a reduced penalty.

— George Hagglund. The writer is emeritus professor at the University of Wisconsin School for Workers in Madison.

A “Do Not Do” List

Every steward in the world has a To Do list of one sort or another. That list consists of the continuing chores that come with your responsibilities, tasks that add up to the very basics of being a steward, from keeping paperwork properly filed to attending union meetings and keeping up with the work of the union.

But while the To Do list is important, just as important is the Do Not Do list — the actions and attitudes every steward should guard against. A conscientious and dedicated steward who faithfully checks off every item on his or her To Do list can still end up doing a bad job by ignoring the pitfalls of the Do Not Do list.

What are some Do Not Do's?

1. Don't always wait for a worker to come to you with a grievance. It's part of your job to keep your eyes and ears open to problems on the job that affect your co-workers, so don't hesitate to be the initiator of action. Don't just react to the complaints and concerns of others.

2. Don't act like you're something special, just because you're the steward. You don't need a chip on your shoulder. Ultimately you're a worker just like everyone else. You got the job of steward because people have faith in your decency and good sense. Don't disappoint them.

3. Don't pretend to know all the answers. Nobody does. When a member comes up with a question or problem you don't know how to handle, seek advice from more experienced stewards or your union officers. The only thing worse than not offering advice is offering bad advice.

4. Don't fail to keep workers up to date on what's happening with their grievances. Even if a member's grievance is just working its way through the process, tell them that. Otherwise they'll think their issue has been forgotten or dumped onto some back burner.

5. Pursuing grievances is a lot of work, and there can be a temptation always to try to talk members out of filing. Don't fall into that lazy rut. Nor, when you do file a grievance, should you present it as if you're only doing it because you're obligated to. That's not fair to the member or to the union. Your chances of winning a grievance rise in proportion to the conviction with which you present it.

6. Don't make assumptions: many a grievance has been lost because a steward figured “this kind” of case can be handled the way “it's always been handled.” Investigate each grievance properly and thoroughly. Every situation is different, and a solid investigation will most likely turn up some evidence that can give you an advantage.

7. Don't get carried away with your legal right to be management's equal while discharging your duties on behalf of the union. You don't have to take any nonsense from management, and you should stand toe-to-toe when arguing your case. But you should also remain civil and thoughtful in your presentation. Routinely resorting to yelling and profanity will only make your work more difficult in the long run and lessen the effectiveness of those tactics when they can, on rare occasion, be strategically used.

8. If you've got a problem with a member, work it out in private.

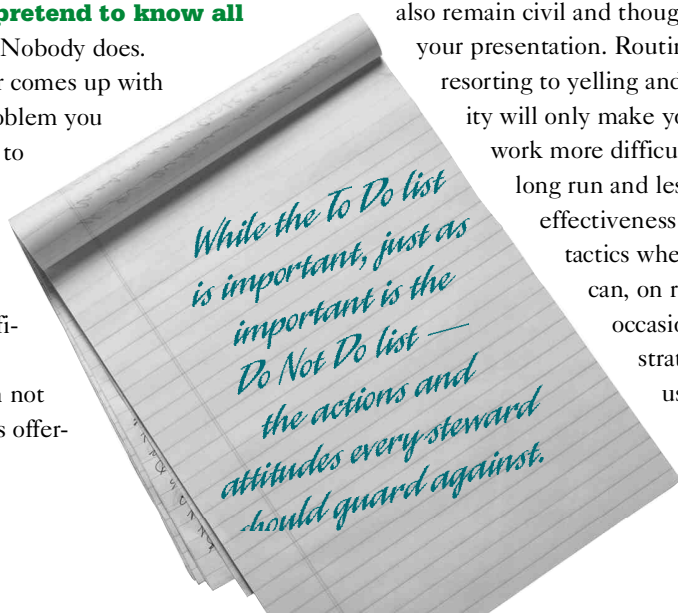
Don't bawl out a member in front of a group of workers or in front of a supervisor.

9. Don't procrastinate. Not every member concern has to be addressed the very minute it's brought to your attention, but some should be: a major health or safety issue, for example. If a member calls with a problem, even if you can't deal with it immediately, let the member know that you're aware of his or her concern. If nothing else, set a specific time and place where you can get together and discuss what should be done.

10. Don't be an information hog. Everyone likes to know stuff that others don't, and get a little kick out of telling people, in dribs and drabs, about important things that can affect their lives. When you learn something that is going to have an impact on your co-workers, tell them.

11. Don't let yourself be pushed around. As steward you're there to help your co-workers, but you're not a servant. Just because someone thinks he or she's been wronged and the union should pursue a grievance, that doesn't automatically mean you have to file one. If your understanding of the situation and your investigation make it clear to you that there's simply no justification in filing a grievance, tell that to the worker. If you allow yourself to be pushed into pursuing unreasonable cases, you'll only weaken the union and its ability to help in legitimate situations.

12. Remember whose side you're on and don't allow yourself to be used as a management tool. Don't enhance a supervisor's prestige by permitting him to have you do his dirty work, such as enforcing your employer's rules or calling workers to task for minor abuses of certain privileges negotiated by the union. It's management's job to manage the workforce, not yours.



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OFFICE OF THE INTERNATIONAL PRESIDENT

Dear IAM Representatives:

IAM members regularly turn to shop stewards with questions about local union affairs and their collective bargaining agreements. Shop stewards also field questions about their international union, national politics and individual issues that often go far beyond contract administration and enforcement. Providing reliable information on such a wide range of subjects is among the steward's most challenging assignments.

Fortunately, it is not an assignment that stewards will ever be expected to handle alone. Seasoned IAM representatives at the local and district level are available to provide assistance in matters of contract administration. And a search of web-based resources such as www.goiam.org and www.aflcio.org can provide stewards with background and answers on almost any union-related issue.

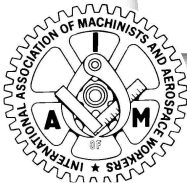
If necessary, stewards should not hesitate to tell a member, "That's a good question. I'll get back to you." It may not be the steward's job to have the answer to every question, but once asked, it becomes the steward's job to find the right answer.

The current issue of the *IAM Educator* is another resource that provides stewards with valuable information. In "One-on-One Recruiting," there is sound advice on how to introduce the union to new employees in locations where membership is not automatically required. In "Rallying the Troops," stewards are given tips on how to use humor, satire and theatre to increase interest and participation at union events.

With U.S. elections on the horizon and global challenges facing nearly every workplace, this is a time of many questions for union representatives. Fortunately, there is a solid network of support, information and everlasting appreciation for the front line stewards who continue to be the voice, the backbone and the heart of this union.

In appreciation and solidarity,

R. Thomas Buffenberger
International President



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