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Communicating with Members



Communicating with Members

All effective unions have this one characteristic in common: they build a relationship with members through good communication.

Union members know what's going on within the local union, at the worksite, in the political arena, and in their community. Union officers and staff know members' interests, concerns, opinions and actions.

And *everyone* knows what's going on with management.

The steward plays a vital communication role in an effective union. The steward is responsible for getting all kinds of information out to members in the workplace — union events, benefit information, bargaining information, news about the employer, political and electoral updates, labour and community news.

Just as importantly, the steward brings *in* all kinds of information. The steward is the union's eyes, ears, and voice in the workplace — listening to members' concerns and interests; answering questions and clearing up misinformation; watching and interacting with management — and voicing all that information to the union's leadership.

In their communicator role, effective stewards do more than just distribute and convey information — as worksite *leaders*, they use information to encourage *action*.

Here are some techniques to get the word *out*, get the word *back*, and encourage *action*.

Always Convey the “Why”

We live in the “information age” — people are bombarded constantly with information. An effective steward will convey the *importance* of the information — *why* it is important to both that worker and our union, and why it is important for the worker to take action.

Example: You have a bargaining

survey you are distributing to workers.

Without the “why”: “Here's a bargaining survey the union wants you to fill out by next week.”

Here it is again, but with the “why”: “Our union wants to get each worker's views on what issues are important so we can begin our preparations to bargain the best possible contract. Here is a bargaining survey I'd like you to complete so we can get your ideas.” Being able to convey the “why” leads us to an additional handy technique that can make this exchange even more effective.

Don't “Proclaim,” but “Converse”

All kinds of studies show that the quality of communication is improved when it is two-way. The steward who has a conversation with a worker about information will have better results than a steward who just “tells” the information to the worker.

Using the example from above, notice the difference between telling and conversing: You have a bargaining survey you are distributing to workers.

The “*proclamation*”: Here's a bargaining survey the union wants you to complete—fill it out by the end of the week.”

The “*conversation*”: “What issues do you think will be important for our union to raise when we begin contract negotiations?”

The conversation begins with an open-ended question — a question that requires more than a “yes” or “no” answer. The proclamation begins with a command.

Choose the Right Time

Everybody's busy (*including you*) but clearly some times are more hectic than others for members. The co-worker running out the door at shift end to pick up children may be less distracted at lunch



time. The co-worker who's not a “morning person” may be more receptive at the end of the day. Choosing a time when members are less likely to be distracted is just common sense.

Members will be more receptive to information and more likely to act on it if they hear it firsthand from the union — from you, the union steward. This is particularly important in situations where we expect management will put out its own information.

When workers hear it from the union first, the union can define the issue rather than “react” to it.

What would *you* want members to hear first?

Management: “The union's demand for increasing staff is because the current staff is working inefficiently and the union just wants more dues payers.”

Union: We are demanding increased staffing because our client caseloads have substantially increased and we want to continue providing quality client service.

Easy choice, eh?

Experienced stewards realize that getting information out to members is more than a “task” — it's an opportunity to engage members on their views and to encourage them to action that strengthens the union.

— Pat Thomas. The writer is Leadership Development Director, SEIU South-Southwest Region.

Weingarten Rules

If a union steward could teach just one thing to his or her members, it would have to be about their “Weingarten rights” — the right of unionized workers to have a steward or someone else from the union present if they find themselves in situations where they may be disciplined.

Many workers crumble in the face of questioning by their supervisor or other management type. They get rattled and start explaining and making excuses and apologizing and often end up giving the employer ammunition to do whatever they want. They often become like the suspects you see in cop shows on television: they ’fess up to things that maybe never even happened or say things in such a way that they worsen the problem rather than talk their way out of it.

With few exceptions, workers across North America enjoy the legal right to have a steward or other union representative present if they find themselves in *any* situation with management — a conversation, a discussion, an interrogation — that could lead to disciplinary action.

But unlike Miranda rights, which police are supposed to tell criminal suspects about (“You have the right to remain silent, anything you say may be used against you...”), employers do *not* have to tell employees about their Weingarten rights. Workers have to *ask* for them. And the only way they’re going to know they have that right, odds are, is if you tell them.

These are the basic guidelines covering the use of Weingarten:

- The employee must make a clear request for union representation before or during the interview. The worker can’t be punished for making such a request.
- The employer must either grant the request and delay questioning until the union person arrives; deny the request,

but end the interview at once; or give the worker the choice of going ahead without representation *or* ending the interview immediately.

■ An employer who denies the worker’s request for representation and continues to ask questions is committing an unfair labour practice. The worker can legally refuse to answer questions in such circumstances.

If the employer obeys the law and waits to continue until the union’s representative arrives, the following rules apply:

■ Once the steward arrives, the supervisor must inform him or her about the subject matter of the interview — the type of misconduct under discussion.

■ The steward and the worker should be allowed to talk privately before the questioning begins.

■ The steward can speak during the interview and, if necessary, ask that questions be clarified. The steward cannot bargain over the purpose of the interview.

■ The steward can advise the worker on how to answer any or all questions, can object to improper questioning, and has the right, once the questioning is ended, to provide additional information. The steward cannot tell workers not to answer questions, or to give false answers.

Be careful that you don’t give Weingarten more power than it has. The rights do not extend to meetings where

no questioning is involved, but rather just too one-way communication from the supervisor to the worker, or a discussion — without threat of discipline — about job performance.

At the same time, remember that workers *do* have the right to call their rights into play if they have any reasonable expectation that a disciplinary action may result from the meeting. The key

word here is *may*. If there’s the slightest concern that the session could bring about discipline, the worker has the right to ask for union help even though the supervisor who calls the employee in may not be intending to take such action. If other workers have been disciplined for similar alleged situations, or if the worker is being called in has had a previous discussion with the supervisor about discipline, or

is working under the threat of a performance warning letter...any of these things can cause a worker to think that

discipline may be an outcome of the meeting.

One final thing: along with being there to support the worker, you can be really helpful by taking complete notes of what goes on during the interview. If the case becomes serious, your notes can be invaluable in documenting who said what.

— David Prosten. The writer is editor of *Steward Update*.

Weingarten Rights

If this discussion could in any way lead to my being disciplined or terminated or have any effect on my personal working conditions, I respectfully request that my union steward, representative or officer be present at this meeting. Without union representation, I choose not to participate in this discussion.



Mid-Contract Bargaining

It should need no repeating that the most important function for an individual steward, or for a steward system as a whole, is building the union, and not just shuffling grievances forms around.

Contract negotiations have always been a great opportunity to carry out this union building, because the interest of the membership in the affairs of the union is never higher than at the time a new contract is being decided. The interests of every member are affected by these negotiations over wages, benefits, and control of the workplace. Compare that level of interest in the union's work to the amount of interest displayed during periods of routine grievance handling. Then, members often feel that only individual cases are under discussion — things like discipline and discharge, or individual rate adjustments. Mentally they regard the situation as “someone else's problem,” and pretty much just don't care about what the union is doing.

A trend toward longer union contracts (seven years or longer) has made it all the more important that stewards not wait for the next round of negotiations before trying to correct a problem in their workplace or in the economy as a whole. Instead, stewards should seize the moment and work on the problems right away — both to bring justice to the workplace and to build the union.

What can stewards do to create the same excitement in the union during these long periods between contract talks? In many cases, unions have two different styles: one for “normal” times and one for negotiations. Realizing that membership interest is highest during negotiations, a

steward should try to duplicate activities from negotiations and use them mid-contract.

Here are some important considerations and tactics to keep in mind:

- Every steward's efforts should be directed to building their union — every shift, every day, and not just during negotiations.

- To accomplish this task, a steward needs to be proactive. That means, staying alert to the possibilities of filing grievances that affect the largest number of members. If a situation could involve more than an individual worker, file a group grievance, and get each member to sign on. This broadens the interest in the issue and duplicates, at least on a small scale, the involvement that accompanies contract negotiations.

- Be visible in supporting these grievances. During contract talks, it's very common for members to show their support by wearing buttons, T-shirts, or stickers. Use the same tactics to support a major grievance — if for no other reason than to stay sharp for the next negotiations.

- Be aware that the recognition clause of the union contract provides for the union to negotiate over all terms of employment. This means that any change in the workplace can be negotiated, even in mid-contract. For example, if an employer introduces a new machine, or changes the work process, you have the right to demand to bargain for a higher pay grade for all of the affected workers.

- Know the law that covers your workplace. A steward in a private sector union, covered by the Labour Relations Act, must understand that the union has a long list of “mandatory subjects of bargaining”

— areas in, around and related to the workplace that a private employer is required to bargain about. If you are a member of a public sector union, look at the provincial legislation and see on which subjects you have the right to negotiate.

- Use these mid-contract grievances as a means to gain support from some of your free riders and to demonstrate to the anti-union workers that belonging to a union “pays” more than the dues money “costs.”

- You can also use these mid-contract negotiations as a new organizing opportunity. If your workplace has some anti-union departments, and your boss wants to dramatically reduce union strength, for example, use the demand for bargaining by the union as an opportunity to recruit these anti-union workers and gain support.

- Expand the normal communications method within your union. Tell the local lodge Communicator and Educator of the grievances. Does your union have special workplace meetings to report on negotiations? Special leaflets or website bulletins? Use the same structure to support grievances.

- Have an attitude! A minor change in a work requirement, like the ability to use a computer, may seem like “no big deal,” but an alert steward can use the change as an opportunity to demand bargaining for a higher pay rate, based on additional responsibilities. Even if you are not successful, the act of bargaining builds the morale of your members.

- The union needs to fight in negotiations against any expansion of the so-called “management rights clause,” which could narrow the rights of the union to negotiate over changes in the workplace.

In larger local Lodges, especially, union officers can be less in touch with every worker and every workplace than they'd want, and may not be aware of changes — new shifts, changed job assignments or requirements — so it's up to every steward to look for every opportunity to bargain and to build union strength.

— Bill Barry. The writer is director of labor studies for the Community College of Baltimore County, Maryland.

Use the interest usually found during contract bargaining to build the union during “normal” times

Helping Newer Stewards

Being a steward is a hard, often thankless job. It makes for high turnover in many Local Lodges — a sure recipe for a weakened union and a corps of seriously overworked veteran stewards.

It doesn't have to be this way. Experienced stewards can use what they've learned to bring newer stewards along — to mentor them with learning opportunities, resources, encouragement and support. Just as a seasoned mechanic shares the secrets of the craft with a new apprentice, so too can a veteran steward lend a hand to a newcomer. And the learning is two-way — the veteran steward can benefit from the fresh perspective of the new recruit. Here are some ideas on how to mentor effectively.

Empathize and Support

In your initial conversations, reach an agreement with the new steward about your mentoring relationship. What would they like to get out of it? What do you hope to gain yourself? When will you get together to see how things are going? Note: A regular check-in time is useful!

Put yourself in the new steward's shoes. Remember what it was like when you had to handle your first grievance. You were probably nervous, self-conscious, unsure of yourself, and afraid of blowing the case for the member who'd come to you for help. Support the new steward with encouragement, positive comments about their commitment to the union and their efforts to help others. Acknowledge the skills they've already developed and assure them they'll continue to learn and grow. Here's a skill you've developed over the years that you've served as steward. You can put it to good use as a mentor. When you get together, ask new stewards how things are going and let them talk about what's

been happening, without judging or commenting. Paraphrase what you hear first; don't jump right in with explanations or answers. Sometimes just having the chance to talk without interruption will allow new stewards to "think out loud" and work their own way through a problem. Plus, it will help you develop some trust, so that new stewards will feel comfortable coming to you when they're stuck or have made a mistake.

Intervene as Gently as Possible

At some points, you will want to step in with advice or direction. Try to remember that adults learn best if they figure things out for themselves, not when someone simply tells them the answer. The more you tell new stewards what to do, the more dependent they become on you.

When tempted to intervene with advice, stop and think: What is the lowest level of intervention that

might work in the situation? From minimum to maximum intervention, your choices are:

1 Don't do anything, especially if the result of the steward's making a mistake will not be serious. The steward will learn from mistakes!

2 Just ask questions. Ask questions for your own clarification and to help the steward learn to think through a problem. "This is an interesting argument you're making on this grievance form. Why did you choose the discrimination clause as the basis for the grievance? Is that the only language you think applies in this situation?"

3 Suggest choices. This is useful when the steward is facing a new situation and having trouble deciding what to do next: "You have several ways to go with this safety issue. You

could confront the supervisor now, you could do some more investigating on your own, or you could get with the workers in that department and see if they have ideas about correcting the problem and would be willing to approach the supervisor with you. What do you think would work best, and why?"

4 Suggest particular ideas or action. Don't do this unless the steward is at a complete loss about what to do next or is extremely discouraged or low-energy. For example, "When I've had to deal with a suspension like this, I've always made it a point to check out how other workers have been treated who've committed the same offence. The personnel office has good records on absenteeism disciplines." This is a strong intervention that denies the new steward the chance to think through the situation and may encourage dependence. Your goal is the opposite: to get the steward functioning independently from you.

5 Give an explicit direction. This is the most forceful form of intervention and should not be used unless all else has been tried and failed, and when time is short. "Word the grievance like this and file it NOW. The time limit is up at 5:00 p.m. today!!" Some people will be relieved when you do this, but they won't necessarily do it right the next time, either. Others may be angry. Still others may resign.

6 Show the steward how to complete the union "fact-sheet" for follow-up.

Your mentoring efforts will pay off when you see new stewards handling their own grievances with confidence and competence. You'll have helped them reach the potential that was inside them all along, and you'll have a more manageable workload yourself!

— Barbara Byrd. The writer is the Portland coordinator of the University of Oregon's Labor Education & Research Center.

Mentor new stewards with learning opportunities, encouragement and support

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OFFICE OF THE INTERNATIONAL PRESIDENT

Brothers and Sisters,

As we head into the closing months of 2006, you can be proud of the work you have done as shop stewards. You were at the front lines of a critical effort to advance pro-worker issues and elect pro-worker candidates in both the United States and Canada. You brought new energy and commitment to the IAM's revitalized organizing efforts. And, every day, you helped thousands of IAM members by making sure that their rights were protected in the workplace.

The right to union representation is an important issue addressed in this edition of the IAM Educator. As stewards, you know how important union representation is for our members. The sad fact is, however, that most working men and women in North America don't have union representation. Each and every IAM member has a responsibility to help change that. We must all help make the IAM a vibrant and growing union. Only through organizing can we protect our members' existing rights and bring the rights and benefits of union representation to the millions of unorganized workers in North America.

I know your job as a shop steward is not an easy one and I commend you for the outstanding job all of you do. To help you do your jobs as stewards, I urge you to take advantage of the full range of classes being offered at the William W. Winpisinger Education and Technology Center, which has been an international leader in labour education for more than 20 years. The official call for 2007 Leadership and Specialized Classes was mailed to all lodges in September, 2006 (also available at <http://winpisinger.iamaw.org>). New to the Leadership program in 2007 are two sessions of Spanish Leadership I as well as new staff programs addressing organizing topics. Education is the key to effectively representing all of our members and organizing new members.

I look forward to working with all of you to continue to build our union in 2007.

In Solidarity,

R. Thomas Buffenbarger
International President

