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Controlling the Loose Cannon



Controlling the Loose Cannon

Stewards know better than anyone how important it is to have union members who are active, committed and enthusiastic. Members who take the union seriously and who aggressively support it in its work can make all the difference between an organization the employer takes seriously and one he just laughs off or ignores altogether.

But can the union have members who are too enthusiastic, too aggressive, too anxious to jump into the battle? The answer is yes. These folks are called loose cannons — people who get so passionate about something, so enthusiastic, and so out of control, that they end up hurting the union more than helping.

You've probably encountered a few over the years. They're the kind of people who, upon seeing what they believe to be a contract violation, take it upon themselves to get in the face of a supervisor and declare that unless things are corrected immediately, there's going to be a strike.

Volunteering, then Disappearing

They're the kind of people who rush to the front of the line to volunteer to handle a task the union needs done...but then disappear when it actually comes time to do the work.

And they're the kind of people who take every opportunity to point out how bad things are and offer a ton of ideas on what to do about it, but then refuse to work with the union team to make things better. Then, they complain just as loudly that the union isn't doing anything, or is doing it wrong.

As often as not, loose cannons end up doing more damage than good.

They pose a real problem for the steward. On the one hand, they possess some valuable characteristics important to building the union. On the other hand, those positive characteristics come coupled with flaws that can spell disaster for their co-workers and the union itself.

Loose cannons tend to be full of energy and enthusiasm. They like activity and frequently volunteer to do things. Once the initial surge of activity dies down, though, they're gone, no longer interested in the routine or follow-up work needed to see a campaign or activity through to the end.

Leaving a Mess

Loose cannons are often intelligent and creative — but lack common sense. Almost always, they act before they think. The result? They leave a mess behind.

Loose cannons sometimes have trouble knowing the difference between being brave and being foolish. They attract others with their liveliness and creative ideas, but they tend to be poor team players. They fade away once they lose interest, leaving others to sweep up the debris left in their wake.

How can stewards deal with loose cannons? By finding situations that take advantage of their positive traits, and avoiding situations that end up causing trouble.

First off, be honest with the person. Describe the effect of his or her loose cannon activities. Emphasize the importance of the union acting as a united

force. Let the person know that he's appreciated for his positive qualities, such as energy, enthusiasm and creativity, but emphasize that a union is a team, and good teamwork requires careful planning.

Next, channel the cannons into activities that make good use of their positive qualities. Some possibilities:

- Consider letting them make the union's first contact with new workers. Their energy and enthusiasm can give newcomers a good impression of the union.

- Involve them in short-term, high-activity projects. On the morning of a rally or other event, for example, ask them to go around and remind everyone to participate.


- Maybe you can use their energy and enthusiasm to keep management off guard. Loose cannons are often good at speaking spontaneously. If you can control the aspects of the meeting, they can be effective in a labour-management session called to discuss a particular issue.

Be sure to talk through possible scenarios with the loose cannons before assigning them to an activity. Since loose cannons tend to act before they think, turn the tables and make them talk through what they are going to say or do.

The steward who can channel the energies of a loose cannon has mastered an important lesson in union-building: helping people develop their positive attributes while decreasing their negative ones, all for the good of the group.

— Pat Thomas. The writer is on the staff of the Service Employees International Union.

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Stewards and Negotiations

One important role of a union steward is to increase membership participation in union activities. To this end, contract negotiation time is almost magical — members who have not attended a local meeting in years suddenly are sitting in the front row. Co-workers who were “too busy” to read newsletters or leaflets or e-mails about union activities suddenly need extra copies and have all kinds of questions. When you could usually have a local lodge meeting in a phone booth, as the contract expiration approaches, you need to rent a stadium.

How can a steward help make contract negotiations successful?

In the first place, everyone should agree on two key goals: a short-term goal of a better contract with no takeaways, and a long-term goal of a stronger union. A union today that comes out of negotiations stronger than it went in can claim a significant achievement that will be felt for years and that can also be the basis for new organizing campaigns.

Get the Membership Ready

Long before the two sides actually sit at the bargaining table, stewards can prepare the membership by circulating bargaining surveys prepared by the union. These sheets ask the membership to list priorities for the new contract and can help guide the negotiating committee. The activity of passing out — and retrieving — the surveys gives stewards the opportunity to speak with every member and to begin to build membership confidence and morale.

As you speak with your co-workers, stress that negotiations are not a TV show for the members to sit back and watch. Negotiations have to involve every member (and even non-members in open shop situations) and each must be ready to refocus a commitment of time and energy

while the negotiations are going on.

As the negotiations start, an important function of the steward system is to quickly and accurately distribute information about the talks, especially if they are held away from the work site.

One of the major strategic decisions that a local has to make is the method of conducting negotiations. Often management will “suggest” a blackout on information as part of the negotiating ground rules, arguing that fewer people knowing about issues of contention will make resolving them easier. While every union and every negotiation is unique, and a blackout might make sense in special situations, there is powerful evidence to suggest that the more those members know about negotiations, the stronger and more successful the union will be.

More Involvement, More Power

In the first place, the more members who are aware and involved in what’s going on, the more leverage the union will have. Bargaining power comes from a total membership effort and commitment to successful negotiations. An informed membership is a powerful membership.

There will certainly be disagreements among the members — over bargaining priorities, over bargaining strategy, over details of the settlement (or strike), but these disputes are healthy for a local lodge, so long as all members keeps their eyes on the prize of an outstanding contract and a stronger union.

Second, management is notorious for leaking “information” to discredit the union and to disrupt the bargaining process. Well-trained supervisors can serve as a disciplined “information” conduit. If the union does not have a better network through the steward system, management’s version of negotiations will prevail. This distorted flow of “information” can undermine the credibility of the

union negotiators and spread dissension among the members. Once this process starts, negotiations from the union’s side are a downward spiral. Stewards who are well-informed about the issues and the strategy provide the counter-attack, providing invaluable support for the negotiating committee by emphasizing priorities and resolving disagreements.

Set up sophisticated methods for distributing information. Just passing out leaflets isn’t enough, especially in workplaces with many shifts or divisions. Stewards can set up e-mail lists, or collect cell phone numbers, or even use Instant Messaging. The local can establish a web site with a “blog” for membership comments.

Show Support

Passing information is simply a prelude to the organization of the members for active and visible support for the union’s positions. There are some easy ways to show support: wearing buttons, signing petitions and holding lunchtime meetings are common tactics. They demonstrate to the boss that “there are more of us than there are of you.” Expanding awareness and support of the negotiations into the community, or to other workplaces of the employer, requires activity from every member. A few dedicated stewards and officers simply cannot cover all of the areas. Every steward in every department, passing out buttons or newsletters, expands the activity of the union.

If the intensity of negotiations picks up, stewards have to step up the involvement of the members. Informational picketing, special meetings or leaflet distributions all require a sacrifice of time and energy by the members, so the stewards have to keep prodding those who are reluctant or fearful. Keep stressing that the negotiations require total membership commitment. Management always measures membership participation as one sign of union strength, so a steward’s efforts at improving turnout can only help the negotiations.

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

Organizing Around Workload Issues

When an employer's solution to economic or competitive pressures is to have too few people do too much work, the steward is often the first to see the repercussions... and be confronted with the need to look for solutions. Unfortunately, workload problems have become increasingly common as "downsizing" employers of all sorts try to wring more and more productivity out of fewer and fewer people.

As difficult as they are, however, workload issues frequently are good issues to organize around. You may want to begin your organizing by trying to determine if the problem is solvable or partly solvable. Is it reasonable to think you can win some changes? Do other workers feel strongly about the workload problem?

After analyzing the problem you may decide that now is not the time to take on the issue if it is one of those "head against a brick wall" situations or if not enough other workers are concerned.

If you decide to move forward, however, you will want to check your union contract and see if there is any language on workload. Check with other union leaders and staff: has anything been tried before to address this kind of problem?

Use your creativity when you think about what collective activities might be used to involve other workers in the workload issue. Remember every workplace and workplace culture is different.

Some Specific Actions

The following list should give you some ideas:

- Document the impact of the workload. You may want to include the effect of the workload on clients, customers, product quality, costs, lost time because of accidents and/or other factors. Brainstorm with your co-workers about all the negatives.

Survey members. Make your survey short and easy to fill out. Pick one to three

questions that can be answered yes or no. For example: Has your workload increased in the last six months? Does your workload negatively impact the quality of your work? Publicize the results. For example, "97% of workers state that the increased workloads negatively impacted the quality of work at ___ Company."

- File a grievance signed by all the affected workers.

- Wear stickers or buttons with an appropriate message, perhaps "Too Much Work = Too Little Quality" or "Warning: Exhausted Worker." You can run stickers off on a photocopy

machine using address labels and they can be placed on telephones, machines, paperwork ... as well as yourselves.

- Everybody can wear the same colour clothes or a ribbon — perhaps yellow with an accompanying sticker declaring: DANGER — WORK OVERLOAD.

- You can undertake small, collective actions. For example, in a staff meeting everyone clears their throats or loudly shuffles their papers at the same time if the supervisor does not agree to provide the additional staff everyone agrees is needed.

- The union can develop a performance evaluation form for all supervisors, to be filled out by the workers. The results could be posted on the union bulletin board or published in your newsletter. The survey could carry questions that yield results such as, "95% of the supervisors were ranked below average on their ability to provide extra help when needed."

- You could take a delegation of workers in to speak to the supervisor or other higher-ups about the workload. Be prepared to give clear and specific proposals for change.

- You might want to investigate and report on the workload standards among competitors or similar employers in your industry, especially if you can show that your workplace is at a competitive disadvantage due to heavy workloads.

Build the Pressure

It may help to start with collective actions that are the easiest and least risky for your co-workers to participate in. You can build toward stronger actions after you have pulled off the less risky ones. An anonymous survey is a very low risk collective activity

and the results can be quite powerful if you publicize them to company customers, the public or regulatory agencies. Remember to always check out your plans with the union leadership and other stewards.

You will need to be clear about what exactly you want management to do. For example, you might need a complete orientation for new staff *before* they are counted as additional staff. If you think you cannot win this, you might want to start with documenting the problems and making sure that top management is forced to hear workers' concerns. Once you succeed in this, you may then want to move forward with your demand for additional staff orientation.

Whatever workload problems you face, remember it is best to have a plan of action that doesn't leave you alone and isolated from your co-workers. Together, workers *can* make a difference, even on workload problems.

— Teresa Conrow. The writer has worked full time with unions throughout the world for more than twenty years on global strategic campaigns against transnational companies, internal and external union organizing, and labour education methodologies. She is a member of AFT Local 1531.

As difficult as they are, workload issues can be good issues to organize around

Countering Management's Games

Smart supervisors and managers know that the best way to have a productive workplace is to play it straight and fair with everyone, especially with the steward when there's union business to be done. Unfortunately, though, not all managers and supervisors are all that smart. Many take pleasure in making the union's work as difficult as possible, especially when the grievance process is called into play.

Let's take a look at some of the ways management can try to wreck the procedure — and what an alert steward can do to counter these moves.

1 The stall: No it's not a home for a horse. This strategy is designed to make you wait. Your supervisor never replies to your request for a meeting, or never answers the first-step grievance.

Employers stall for a variety of reasons, but the bottom line is that your request for some action is ignored. The tactic is frustrating and demanding, but your response should always be business-like. If the request for a meeting goes unheeded, make it again. If it is ignored a second time, put the request in writing with a copy to the union and the supervisor's boss.

If the issue is a response to a grievance, chances are the boss is trying to get you to miss your time limits. Never let that happen. If you do not get an answer within the limits set out in your contract, go ahead and appeal the grievance to step two with a note that the first-step grievance was not answered in a timely fashion. Document your action and make sure the union is aware of the problem. In some unions the second step appeal is made by a union officer or staffer, so fol-

low your local's procedure. But don't miss your deadline because of the stall. One other note: Some unions have the enviable language in their agreement that if the step one grievance is not answered in a timely fashion, the grievance is granted. So check your contract and make sure that you know your grievance procedure.

2 The blow-out: In this scenario, the boss wants you to lose your cool, usually at the grievance meeting. You could be ridiculed, ignored, yelled at — anything to get you so hot that your emotions rule, not your intelligence. When you get angry, you forget your game plan and the meeting ends in a shouting match.

Sometimes the boss will aim the strategy at the grievant. You may have been in meetings where the supervisor turns to your member and says something like this:

"Did you really think you

could get away with that?" Or "Aren't you old enough to know better?" Lines like this are designed to get the worker angry enough to say something he or she shouldn't. The member might disclose something on record that does not even belong in the meeting, or lose his cool and become insubordinate.

Keep things in control. At the grievance meeting, you do the talking. Tell the member what to expect and not to get flustered or angry with any question that's asked. Educate the member before you go into the meeting. You can stop the meeting at any time and leave the room to regroup and cool things down.

3 The trade: Formally called horse-trading, this tactic has nothing to do with ponies. It is an attempt by management to get something before

they give something. You may be asked to drop one grievance to get settlement on another. Don't fall for this ploy. Pursue all grievances on their merit. Horse-trading is not only unfair to the member being sacrificed; it's a tactic that can lead to the union being sued by the worker whose grievance is being tossed.

4 Divide and conquer: A house divided will not stand, and neither will a local union. Never allow one member to be played off against another. Never air disagreements in front of management. Have your discussion outside the room, out of earshot.

5 Side issue: Here, the supervisor will bring up extraneous issues, other grievances, or the employer's latest new rule. If the meeting has been called to discuss a grievance, redirect the conversation back to the issue at hand, as often as necessary. Don't get sidetracked. Keep control of the meeting.

6 Shifting the burden of proof: This is often used in a disciplinary hearing or appeal. Management is charging the member with some kind of infraction. Under the general rules of discipline, management must prove its case. The burden's on them. This doesn't mean you stay stone silent during the meeting. You should play a very active role in defending the member, but it is the employer's job to carry the burden of proof.

These are six tactics that can be used by management at grievance meetings. They may be used to test a new steward, or to take back control of the grievance procedure from a union that has built a record of success in using it. Don't be fooled.

— Robert Wechsler. The writer is Education and Research Director of the Transport Workers Union of America, AFL-CIO.

There are several ways to counter efforts to wreck the grievance procedure

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OFFICE OF THE INTERNATIONAL PRESIDENT

Dear Brothers and Sisters:

I would like to take the opportunity along with the Executive Council and your GVP Dave Ritchie to wish all Officers, IAM stewards, shop committees and their families a healthy and Happy New Year.

For far too long, workers have seen their wages and benefits cut, their jobs outsourced, their very livelihoods shattered as corporate profits have soared... all permitted by worker-hostile governments that put big business first. Let's work together to make sure governments in both countries bring about the changes we need to protect and preserve workers' rights.

Brothers and Sisters, we must take advantage of the change in governments and use the opportunity to fight for the millions of unorganized workers so they, too, can have the rights and benefits of union representation: IAM representation. I'm counting on you to help organize so we can help non-union workers across North America and continue to protect the benefits our members have won.

And finally, this issue of the *IAM Educator* has several important articles to help you become a better steward. The topics include the role stewards can play to ensure successful contract negotiations; what stewards can do to combat an employer's unfair increases in workloads; counter-ing management games that slow down the grievance process, and strategies for turning a "loose cannon" into an asset in the workplace.

We have a lot to do this year. Thank you for doing your part.

In Solidarity,

R. Thomas Buffenbarger
International President

