

Effective Listening

A huge part of the steward's job is communicating with the membership — but, under the gun with a million things to do and too little time to do them, many stewards forget that communicating is a two-way street. The job isn't just to let the members know what's going on in the union, but to take time to hear what the members are saying, too.

To be a truly effective steward, you really have to fully absorb the perspectives and desires of the members. You must acknowledge the other person's opinions, even when — *especially* when — they differ from your own. Above all, you must be a good listener.

Listening sounds easy, an ability most of us never even think about. But good listening actually requires using a number of special skills, some of them natural as can be, others a little more demanding. Let's take a look at them.

Steps Toward Better Listening

n Keep your eyes trained on those of the person talking to you. This helps to keep both of you focused on the discussion.

n Avoid distractions. When you need to do some serious listening, choose a quiet, comfortable setting where your mind is less likely to wander.

n While remaining alert, keep your voice and body language relaxed to create a supportive environment in which the speaker is more confident. You don't want to stand there with your arms folded across your chest, looking bored or mad.

n Be open-minded about what's being said and who's saying it. Try to shed preconceptions and assumptions, and limit your evaluation to the statements being made.

n Don't interrupt. That can derail the speaker's train of thought. Ask questions

only as needed to clarify a point. But at the same time, using body language and occasional summaries, let the other person know that you are listening attentively.



n Speech involves thought and emotion. Both are important. Pay attention to the speaker's demeanor, and try to get a sense of his or her feelings.

n A speaker uses more than speech to communicate. Look at posture, facial expressions and physical gestures as clues pointing to greater meaning.

Practice Empathy

There will be times when you don't agree with the facts surrounding a situation, as they are presented by the speaker. Yet while it's appropriate to clarify important information, questioning someone's feelings, emotions and motives can put you in dangerous territory.

As individuals, each of us brings a unique and complex set of personality factors, history, knowledge and biases to whatever life throws our way.

Respect this by avoiding the word "you", as in "You are trying to get back at Sam." Instead, claim your own interpretation, such as, "I get the impression that you are upset with Sam."

Some workers need to let off steam. Don't discourage them. Your immediate task is to *hear* what they have to say, not to *judge* what they have to say.

Avoid Judging Something "Routine"

Many complaints may at first appear similar. But to every speaker, each issue is unique, with its own set of circumstances. Don't jump to conclusions about what the speaker has to say. Filing a grievance based on your assumptions can wind up harming the person you are trying to help, and the union as well.

To encourage open communication, convince the speaker that you hear and comprehend the message and respect his or her right to convey it. While you don't have to agree with every point, strive to seek areas of agreement, and acknowledge areas where you differ.

Slow Down

People's brains process thoughts approximately four times faster than they do the spoken word. It's very easy to skip ahead in a conversation, using your assumptions and extraneous thoughts to fill in for what has yet to be spoken. Don't run away with your thoughts. If you slow down and resist the urge for quick analysis, you will be better focused on what is actually said, and better able to respond appropriately and knowledgeably. Take the time to get the full story.

It's a good idea to wait until the speaker is done before responding. That way, you'll be acting on the maximum amount of information,

while validating the speaker's right to unimpeded communication.

Don't forget to have fun. When you practice good listening skills, you will be more strongly engaged in the life of your workplace and the diverse workers who belong to it. This essentially social component is one of the most valuable rewards there is to being a steward.

Good listening actually requires using a number of special skills

Demotions as Punishment

Management likes to assume that a contract's management rights clause gives them an unlimited license to demote workers who have somehow dissatisfied them. Not true. As in the case of other disciplines, the employer needs good reasons for removing someone from his or her job.

Arbitrators seem to demonstrate a pattern to their decisions that is useful to bear in mind if you're faced with a case where one of your people is demoted. You'll see that cases fall into two categories: those involving poor performance, and those in which individuals are punished by management for doing something. The latter type seem to be easier to win.

Hung Up on Supervisor

Management demoted a lead man who didn't comply with a supervisor's request and later hung up the phone on another supervisor. The arbitrator put him back on his old job, stating that the grievant was frustrated when he hung up the phone; demonstrated remorse over his behavior; was an effective lead person and was still capable of performing his job; had complied with all other management directives, and the supervisor with whom he had difficulties had been transferred elsewhere.

Cheating on Meat Packaging Dates

A supermarket meat department manager was suspended and then demoted for violating the market's meat dating policy by authorizing re-wrapping and re-dating of meat products. The union complained the grievant was not put on notice that his actions violated company policy. The arbitrator upheld the discharge, noting that other managers committing similar offenses had received similar disciplines and the grievant violated an important safety policy after being told violation of the policy would not be tolerated.

Reckless Driving

The company demoted a fork lift operator following an accident in which the operator broke a guard rail and failed to report the incident. The arbitrator reinstated him to his job, noting that his earlier safety violations were comparatively minor compared to others who were demoted by management, the damage was serious but this was the grievant's only driving accident, and the grievant's accident record was not as extensive or as numerous as those of other demoted employees.

Demotion for Negligence

A training coordinator was demoted for not grading part of a group of employees' recertification tests. The arbitrator put her back on the job, noting that she had just returned from working on a special project and the recertification workload was too big for her to handle.

Demoted as Punishment

A factory maintenance foreman was demoted as a disciplinary measure after he refused to take a test and pay a pesticide license fee, claiming the company hadn't paid him for the last time he took the test. The arbitrator put him back on the job, noting that the "just cause" standard applied to demotions as well as other forms of discipline.

Didn't Attend Retreat

An assistant news editor at a newspaper was demoted to copy editor for refusing to attend a retreat at her managing editor's house. The arbitrator let the demotion stand, saying that, even though the grievant was not a supervisor, she had leadership responsibilities and the authority to direct outcomes of a particular news publication; the employer had the right to impose disciplinary demotions where disciplinary suspensions have been given out under the agreement; the agreement was silent on disciplinary demotions, and the employer

had retained the right to manage the workforce, including disciplining for just cause.

Absenteeism

An employee was demoted for absenteeism. The arbitrator put him back on the job, noting normal penalties for rule violations are reprimand, suspension and discharge, and nowhere in the contract was demotion mentioned. The demotion violated the employee's seniority and promotion rights, where the contract stated that, "demotions will be made in the reverse order of promotions." Promotions are based upon seniority and qualifications; the grievant obtained his promotion through the bidding process, and was not demoted for lacking qualifications.

Untrained

A worker was demoted from a newly created supervisory position for "inability to perform." The arbitrator reinstated him because, he said, the demotion was arbitrary, unreasonable and disciplinary in effect, despite the allegation of inability to perform. He said the employer had a duty to train new supervisors in supervising others, and there was no evidence that the grievant had received any such training.

Remember to ask these questions when checking out a demotion grievance:

- n Was the worker's treatment consistent with how others are treated?
- n Was the demotion for poor performance, and was the employee forewarned of the possibility of demotion?
- n Was the punishment too harsh for the nature of the rule violation?
- n Does the management rights clause include the right to demote?
- n Were the demands placed upon the employee excessive?
- n Is demotion mentioned in the contract as an optional punishment for rule violations?

— George Hagglund. The writer is Professor Emeritus at the School for Workers, University of Wisconsin - Madison.

The employer needs good reasons for removing someone from his or her job

Stewards and Politics

Stewards are responsible for communicating with their co-workers on a lot more than the changes in a newly negotiated union contract or where to go for more information about the health plan. Stewards are the union's agent on a broad range of issues, activities and programs, and few are more important than one that can be especially challenging: electoral politics.

The fact is, unionists discovered early on that whatever could be won at the negotiating table could be lost at the hands of politicians. Thanks to the power of money, employers have always had more influence on lawmakers than have workers, so it's a never-ending battle to protect labor's gains and to block new anti-worker initiatives.

This is a reality that strikes home especially clearly this year, when voters in the U.S. will be electing a new president, a new House of Representatives, one-third of the Senate and untold numbers of governors and other legislators and executives. In Canada, a national election is likely to be called by fall.

Inform, Don't Dictate

No union can — or should — order its members to vote for specific candidates, but just about every union does try to inform its members about the important issues and which of the candidates it believes will best serve their interests if elected. It's often part of a steward's duty to pass along that information, just as he or she passes along information about contract changes, health and safety issues and other matters more immediately affecting the workforce.

So, with elections coming up, how do you talk with your members about candidates, endorsements and the need to vote? How do you deal with workers who believe the union should stay out of politics, or who believe it's a "waste of

time" to vote, or who just couldn't care less about the whole thing?

Here are some points to consider.

n Your primary role should be to make sure your people know what the issues are — not who's the good guy and who's the bad guy, but what important things will be decided on election day.

Candidates for major offices often have a record of their positions on such things as affordable health care, workplace safety and health, the minimum wage, retirement security and whether labor laws should be strengthened.

When workers look at the candidates' records they'll see who's on their side.

n Let your members know how much money big business spends in the political arena — corporations and their representatives poured \$709 million into the 2002 U.S. elections, 12 times more than unions. If you think employers spent that kind of money to elect people who would promote *your* interests, you probably also believe in the tooth fairy and the Easter bunny.

Working people can't possibly match that kind of money, so we've got to beat their tactic by countering it with something more powerful: our presence at the voting booth.

n Workers who say they won't vote because they see no difference between the candidates or the parties should be reminded about some real differences that exist. Ask the worker what his or her biggest concerns are. Jobs? Education? Trade? Health care? Transportation? The environment? The major political parties have some strongly differing views on those issues. If you don't have a comparison, your union will. Get it and share it with your co-workers.

n To members who respond to any political information at all with the declaration that unions should "stay out of politics," they can be reminded that the best contract and the best worker protections in the country can be cut to pieces by politicians enacting bad laws. You may have great health care coverage, for example, but if enough politicians fall into the campaign-donations pocket of enough health care industry lobbyists, you'll find your out-of-pocket costs and deductibles skyrocketing and your benefits plunging.

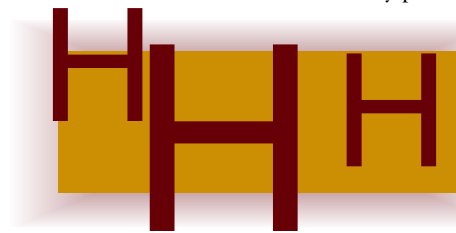
n Some members can't seem to see past their wallets. These folks should be reminded that taxes at all levels are determined by politicians, and politicians

decide whether these taxes are fair to working people or are tilted to benefit business and the

wealthy. Every politician in the world can talk about cutting taxes, but the question is *whose* taxes. A worker who thinks a one-dollar cut is a great thing — but doesn't tune in to the fact that his employer is getting a thousand dollar cut at the same time, and that thousand dollar cut means reduced government services for everything from highways to clean air and water — should take a closer look at what's going on.

n It's a mistake to hand out a list of union-endorsed candidates and expect your co-workers to vote the way the union wants. A research survey by Peter A. Hart and Associates a few years back found that while 90 percent of all union members say they want their union to inform and involve them in political and legislative activities, they don't want to be told how to vote. The same poll, however, showed the importance of face-to-face contact with workers: 76 percent of the time, workers who received a political leaflet from their union at the worksite ended up supporting the union's position at the ballot box.

— David Prosten. The writer is editor of Steward Update. A version of this article appeared in Vol. 11, No. 4.



Managing Your Time

We can't do everything. Much of what we do as stewards is beyond our control.

Grievances may fly one week; the boss may go on a tear the next week; upper management may come up with some crazy scheduling or other scheme the next. If you can't find balance in your union work, nothing will get done and you will burn out

You need to set your priorities when you begin your work as a steward. Inevitably, you will be torn between many tasks. Set yourself the golden rule that you will take on the most important things first. Grievances with time limits should be a priority. Certain safety issues may merit immediate attention. Attending union meetings is basic.

Other issues may be important, for sure, but not ones to tackle first. That desk of yours with all your papers needs attention, but save that task for a day when you have the time and other pressing issues are not pushing you up against the wall. Of course, it pays to get your paperwork filed in a way that will make your work more efficient. It will save you time in the long run.

It's the same with cleaning up the union bulletin board. Every time you pass it, you see it needs attention. But if you are hurrying to an important meeting, make a note and get back to it when there is time. It's not going anywhere.

Keep a Notebook and Calendar

There are lots of tools on the market to keep you organized. You need a notebook to make notes. Those notes should at least record the basics of all your union business — phone calls, notes of meetings, to-do lists, questions for which you must find answers in order to complete your tasks. You also need a calendar to track meetings, time limits on grievances, and any other time sensitive material.

Whether you commit this material to paper, to an electronic organizer, even a computer, make sure you use the system consistently. Do not rely on memory.

Use Time Wisely

Try to manage your time so that you don't have to cover the same territory more than once. If you are researching grievances, and you have to deal with a management office to get the answers you need, make one trip and work on all the grievances at the same time. Then write them up at the same time as well, particularly if you need access to a computer or word processor.

Bunch your information requests together so that you don't have to call people back and risk their being out of the office on the second call. The worst game to play in this business is telephone tag. If you do have to leave a message, leave details about the best time or times to return your call, so you don't find yourself in an endless loop of callbacks.

Keep to a Routine

Kids thrive on routine and so should adults. Set aside time to do your union work and try to stick to it. You are probably feeling the conflicting pulls of family, work, and union already. By setting aside an hour a day to get the paperwork done

you are setting certain limits and helping to maximize your time. Make an appointment with yourself, and try to keep it.

Barring real emergencies, this kind of scheduling should help to ease the pressure. And remember to keep a perspective on what is a real emergency and what is not. Remind yourself that you don't have to respond to every request for assistance or information the moment it's been made. You have a right to your own life, and you shouldn't let your sense of duty overwhelm you. Responding to a co-worker's request for information about next year's holiday schedule shouldn't get in the way of your work on an important grievance or a date with your family.

Give Yourself Space

You need some room to do your work. Some unions have designated space at the workplace — a desk and telephone. Some set aside space at the union hall. You might even consider a desk off in a corner at home so your materials don't bury you, a desk that's for your steward's work only. Don't become the union steward who brags to other stewards that "my car trunk is my filing cabinet."

Most important of all: Be realistic in what you can accomplish and what you need to work on over a period of time. Don't try to do it all at once, and don't be afraid to let the smaller tasks stay in the background while you deal with the more substantial issues. It's not only for your own good, it's for the good of your co-workers and your union.

— Robert Wechsler. The writer is education director for the Transport Workers Union of America.

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OFFICE OF THE INTERNATIONAL PRESIDENT

April 2004

Dear Sisters and Brothers:

Who is the backbone of this union? The Shop Steward is. They do it all. Meeting new members; preserving contact with retired members; assisting members facing furlough or displacement are all vital assignments.

A Shop Steward can provide new hires with valuable information about pay and working conditions while making sure they also know where IAM bulletin boards are located and when union meetings are held.

Retired IAM members represent a great and frequently untapped asset in our Union. While many lodges have active IAM Retiree Clubs, many do not. Shop Stewards should make sure every retiring member has the opportunity to stay involved in our Union.

If a Shop Steward is the first point of contact for new employees, he or she should also be the person with information about resources for out-of-work IAM members. The newly formed Employment Services Department at IAM Headquarters offers valuable assistance in this regard.

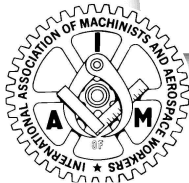
Additional information in each of these areas is available: To contact the IAM Employment Services Dept., call Tony Chapman at 301-967-4717 or by e-mail at: tchapman@iamaw.org. For more information about the IAM Community Service and Retirees Dept., contact Maria Cordone at 301-967-3433 or by email at mcordone@iamaw.org. New members kits can be secured by contacting the IAM Purchasing Dept. at 301-967-4711.

The relationship between IAM members and their union should be a long-term one. Over the years, we rely on one another for support on the job and when we reach personal milestones, such as retirement. And at every step along the way, IAM Shop Stewards are there. So, if anyone wants to know what a Shop Steward does, let him or her know that you do it all.

In solidarity

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "R. Thomas Buffenbarger". The signature is enclosed in a rectangular box with a black border.

R. Thomas Buffenbarger
International President



Managing Your Time

