



Fighting “Steward Stress”

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Let’s face it: being a steward is hard work. You are in high demand because you are recognized as a dedicated leader who knows what’s going on in the union and the workplace. Your members depend on you for representation and information. Plus, of course, you have to do the work your employer pays you for — and you have important personal and/or family obligations just like everyone else.

Hard work is fine, but when it is not managed well it can lead to high levels of stress. While some stress is a part of living, extreme stress can be dangerous. This high level of stress is the helpless, tense feeling you get when your work or life feels out of control. It can be caused by problems at home, at work or in any part of your life in which you are feeling overwhelmed. And it can lead to illness and depression. Obviously, it is something to be controlled, if not avoided.

What causes high levels of stress for union stewards? A grievance caseload that seems too big and/or complicated, for starters. Then there are the many demands on your time for other union activities that can include such things as negotiations, organizing, picketing, and social, political and charitable events. There may be the feeling that the membership does not appreciate your work, or is even critical of it. And, of course, the difficult task of trying to balance your union work with your paid job and the needs of your private life.

Just about everyone experiences high levels of stress at some point in his or her life. But how can we manage our union work to keep stress from getting out of hand? Here are some practical tips used by many long-time union activists:

n As much as possible, set aside specific times to do union work.

Discuss with your local leaders how this would work under the official time or release time provisions of your contract



and/or the practice in your workplace.

n You can’t do everything, so prioritize.

If taking on more and more assignments is going to make you sick, it is not in your interest or the union’s interest for you to continue working at this pace. Think about what you really feel is important. Discuss and work out your activities with your local leaders.

n Learn to say no. As union activists we are asked to do more and more work outside of our local unions. While stewards should participate in the larger labor movement, you don’t have to do everything. For instance, if you go to a picket line to help out another union during the week, maybe you can skip an award banquet on the weekend. If you are helping with voter registration, maybe you can miss the upcoming golf or bowling tournament. Keep in mind that if you try to do everything you may burn out — and end up doing nothing.

n Pay attention to the people who are most important in your life.

Except in emergencies, don’t let a personal event be destroyed by a union problem. Make sure that you attend your kids’ sporting events and school plays, keep appointments with friends, and don’t beg off celebrating birthdays or anniversaries because of the union.

n Take time out for yourself.

While it’s true, as the song says, that “the union makes us strong,” if we don’t get a break from it once in awhile and do something completely different, it can also drive us crazy.

Read a book, develop a hobby, see a movie, work in the garden, learn a new dance step, go fishing. And do whatever you enjoy on a regular basis. You will be more energized and better prepared for the rigors of union work by doing so.

n Get physical. One of the best ways to deal with stress is through some form of exercise. It can be as simple as taking long walks. Or you can try running, playing sports, dancing, swimming or lifting weights. Physical activity causes chemical actions in the body that help to relieve stress, depression and generally put you in a better mood. Of course, check with your doctor before starting any strenuous exercise if you have been sedentary for a long time.

Finally, always remind yourself of the importance of your union work. Gain strength by knowing that you are fighting for justice, for what is right — even if your members forget to thank you for your hard work and sacrifice. Try to achieve a balance between your union work and other important parts of your life. And get some rest.

— Carl Goldman. The writer is executive director of AFSCME Council 26 in Washington, D.C.

Making Your Goals Clear

We have all been at bad meetings: they start late, no one is sure when they're suppose to end, some people are raising their hands to speak, others are just speaking out, there is no written agenda or time limit, and usually not much gets done. People leave frustrated.

One big reason meetings like this happen is that too little attention is paid to something called “definition” — an understanding by all involved of what's being talked about or done, and why.

Without definition, most of the things a steward does can fail as miserably as the meeting described above. You say “oranges” but others hear “apples.” Not only aren't the people you represent on the “same page” as you, some aren't in the same book. At grievance meetings with management it's as if you're broadcasting on the FM band, and they are receiving only on AM.

Lack of definition can make people confused, agitated and sometimes even hostile. These disastrous consequences are avoidable. Here are some examples that show how lack of definition can get in a steward's way — and what can be done about it.

1 A steward asks three members who are unhappy with management's new attendance policy to get together and talk about it after work. The meeting starts off with a lot of energy but people leave frustrated and annoyed over “spinning our wheels” and all the “loose ends.”

What happened? At least two very important things were left undefined in the steward's outreach: the purpose of the meeting and how long it would last.

The steward thought the meeting was to find out how the policy was being implemented — that is, for fact finding. One member, though, thought it was to vent about the unfair policy and the idiots in management. Another member thought it was about planning a job action. Yet a third member kept insisting he want-

ed to hear what the lawyers had to say. The result: the discussion bounced around like a pinball from one topic to the other.

Making it worse, the steward thought they had an hour to meet, but two of the members got up suddenly after 45 minutes saying they had to get to a softball game.

If the steward had defined with everyone at the beginning of the meeting — or, better still, *before* the meeting — the exact purpose of the meeting and how long it would last, they would have had a better session. With at least two more things defined at the end of the meeting — what they accomplished or decided and where they would go from here — they would not have been so frustrated and they would have left the meeting much more ready to take the next steps.

2 Another steward had a grievance meeting with a member and management over discipline. It went badly. Management kept talking directly to the member trying to get a confession or make a deal, and the member first started yelling and then let management know he was interested in the deal.

The problem? Lack of definition. The steward didn't clearly define the roles the member and the steward would play and what to do if management acted badly or made an offer. The steward also didn't define for management some ground rules for the meeting, including that management should deal directly with the steward as the member's union representative — not the member. Again, a little definition would have gone a long way.

3 Another steward, having just come back from internal organizing training, was eager to get members more active in the union. One by one the steward approached members to find out what was on their minds. One by one the members gave the steward a list of things the steward could fix for them. Oops — more definition needed. The members

had one definition of a union: “member complains, steward fixes things.” The steward and the union need to convince members that the definition of a union is “we identify issues together and WE work together to solve them.”

As you go through your steward and other activities, interacting with others, notice how things go. When they are not going so well (people are not listening to each other, nothing is getting done, people are “jumping down each other's throats,” and so on) see if you can identify something important that has been left undefined by the group. Then see if you can improve the situation by suggesting a clarification of one or more of the factors causing the problems. You'll start to agree that “definition” can make a big difference.

— Ken Margolies. *The writer is on the labor education faculty at Cornell University.*

What Needs to be Defined

Following are examples of areas that need to be defined. You'll no doubt encounter more in your work as a steward.

- n Agendas** (What are we here for? In what order will the items be discussed? What action, if any, are we taking on each item?)
- n Time limits** (starting and ending times, how long each can speak, how much time will be spent on a particular subject)
- n Roles** (Are people there to only listen, or to participate? Who chairs? Who speaks? Who votes?)
- n Rules** (how to get recognized to speak, no yelling, don't repeat yourself, stay on the topic)
- n Issues** (Exactly what are we talking about? What do we want to do with the issue? What are the various positions people hold on the issue?)
- n What** was accomplished and next steps (What did we decide or do? What are the loose ends? Who will do what? By when?)

Keeping a Grievance File

Are you satisfied with the way you keep grievance records? If you're not, you should be: your records could make the difference between a co-worker losing a day's pay, missing out on a promotion, or maybe even losing a job. What you do with your notes and paperwork can be critical to the union's ability to help a worker win justice, avoid disaster, or just plain get a fair shake.

Veteran stewards and union staffers will tell you that unless they are accurately written down and carefully filed, even the best facts and evidence are useless to the union if management is determined to have its way. These experienced hands know that a well-organized grievance file can be one of the union's most effective resources — and you, as steward, are key to making sure it's built correctly.

As a steward you will want a file for each grievance you are working on. It's a file that must be available for use by higher-ups in the union chain of command if — and when — the grievance moves through the steps of the grievance procedure. Not only that, it may well become part of your union's files and serve as a vital resource for new stewards and officers preparing for their duties.

Practices differ from union to union, but most have grievance files. Some locals have organized their files by cutting up the contract and pasting each section on a separate folder, either on paper or in a computer. Others may keep them chronologically, by department, or in other ways, but most locals have a central index so they can track down specific cases by the issue, by the grievant, or by both. Whatever the system, it depends on the facts and information gathered, at least initially, by the stewards. In fact, this information serves as the very foundation of the union's case.

So, what would be the contents of a grievance file?

For each grievance, you might want the following facts:

1 Notes on your initial talk with the grievant or grievants.

Obviously, you need the Who, What, When, Where, Why and How of the case. You need names spelled right, job titles, accurate notes on what people say happened when — all the basics you collect when beginning the grievance process.

2 Your working file would contain all your notes on conversations with the grievant, the supervisor or supervisors involved, and witnesses.

Be sure to write down the date and time of these conversations, even if they're just on the phone. The exact time and date of a conversation can be very important later on in piecing together the chronology of a case.

3 The file should contain notes on your own thinking as to which parts of the contract apply to the situation. Don't tell yourself you'll remember. Jot it down.

4 The file should contain any documents you have requested from management and copied for possible use as union exhibits. You'll want these in a safe and secure place, because management's not likely to respond


well if you have to come back to them and say you've misplaced your copies and need them researched and copied again.

5 The file should contain your notes on, or copies of, relevant supporting evidence. This could include relevant arbitration cases or grievance settlements and federal, state or provincial laws or regulations (health and safety, family leave and so forth).

As you build your file keep in mind that the material you're accumulating may not be called into play for days, weeks, maybe even months into the future — even years, in fact, if it becomes a part of the union's permanent files, to be used as a resource for other stewards who end up handling similar or related cases. So that means the file has to be organized in a way that someone else can pick it up later and make sense of what's inside.

Finally, keep the file in a safe place. A lot of stewards have a secure place at work where they can keep their union paperwork, while others have space at home. The best research and the best notes in the world are no good to you, or a grievant, if they can't be located when needed.

— David Prosten. The writer is editor of *Steward Update*. With thanks to *Solidarity in Action: A Guide for Union Stewards*, published by the Labor Center, University of Iowa, Iowa City, Iowa.



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The Steward in a High Performance Work Organization

A lot of stewards find themselves working for employers who have moved to what's frequently called a "high performance work organization" model of operating. If you find yourself in this setting — most common in manufacturing and the service and public employee sectors — you've got to guard your co-workers' interests.

This new model is basically a program that seeks to involve workers at every level to change the work organization and redesign the work process, all in the hope of operating better. It uses management tools with names like Just in Time, Cellular and Modular Production, TQM (Total Quality Management), SPC (Statistical Process Control), Supplies Certification, automated material handling, lean management, focused factories, and employee involvement. The last one — "employee involvement" — may lead to steering committees, problem-centered groups, project teams, work teams, and employee development projects.

Another aspect of the high performance work organization model focuses on new compensation systems, including gain-sharing, profit-sharing, and skill-based pay, all of which have the purpose of moving from hourly pay rates to some form of productivity-based wage payments. Since these changes to wages, hours and working conditions must be bargained, the union's approval and participation are essential.

Here are some things to watch out for if your employer decides to adopt the new model, as well as tips about how to make the process work for your co-workers and the union.

Participation of the Steward

Management must work with the union to achieve its goals. To gain the cooperation it needs, management must offer something in return, perhaps improved working conditions or additional compensation. It must give workers and the steward a chance to help improve the way work gets done. It's important that the union participate in the process, not only to make a contribution, but to protect the interests of those who need help.

Training is important to make sure that each worker can maximize his or her contribution

Proper Training

Stewards facing changing work organizations must make sure that everyone affected is trained to handle the change. It is easy to overlook some workers' needs if they don't appear to be closely related to the employer's immediate

goal of higher productivity and quality. Workers and their stewards need training to participate in project or compensation teams, self-directed work teams, or multi-skilled work teams. In every case, training is important to make sure that each worker can maximize his or her contribution.

Protect the Weak from Threatening Situations

Keep in mind that older workers nearing retirement or workers lacking formal education may look at changes as a threat to their continued employment and well-being. The union and the steward need to make sure that there is a place for them in the "new" workplace. They might be allowed to continue as they did before by red-circling them in their current job; they could be offered extra training to get up

to speed, or an opportunity to retire early, without penalty. As steward, you play a crucial role in identifying workers who may have trouble adjusting to changes.

Seniority and Promotions

The high performance work organization may have the effect of reducing the opportunity for workers to move up to high-paying jobs. If multi-skilled teams are formed, stewards may need to alert their negotiators to the potential problem that promotional opportunities will be reduced, and some workers wind up in dead-end jobs.

Meetings with Management

Regular meetings with union officers, stewards, and workers are needed to explain the proposed project and how workers and the union can not only assist in making changes but benefit from them. Worker concerns must be taken into account. The union should be able to make sure that the membership is informed about what is happening.

Progress Reports

The steward must review what effect the project has had on workers he or she represents. Have workloads changed for the worse? Is safety being taken into account? If higher compensation was promised, have workers' earnings really increased? Have all members of work teams received promised training? If the answer to any of these questions is no, then the steward must step forward and make sure that management and the union are aware of the problem.

The Labor Agreement

Most important, stewards should never lose sight of their primary responsibility to protect rights and privileges guaranteed by the contract. Where the contract and high performance work organization come into conflict, the contract comes first. But, the steward is an important person to identify the kind of problems caused by the new system that require negotiation to set the system right.

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

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OFFICE OF THE INTERNATIONAL PRESIDENT

Dear IAM Representative:

In this issue of the IAM Educator, union representatives are reminded to pay close attention to the high levels of stress that frequently accompany a steward's job.

The pressure from handling grievances, explaining contracts and doing daily battle against anti-union workers, anti-union lawmakers is enough to wear down the best among us.

In "Steward Stress," representatives are given concrete suggestions about how to better manage their time to ensure their family and personal life does not become a casualty of their life on the job.

Stewards should make time for their family and friends. Keep as many family appointments as possible and try to compensate for the hours of desk and phone work that frequently comes with a steward's job.

Setting priorities is the key to managing stress. And with an election in the U.S. coming within weeks that could determine the future of the labour movement throughout North America, union members and union representatives alike will need to focus like a laser on politics.

Despite all the demands on our time and energy, we must give this election the attention it deserves. The current U.S. administration is so wedded to the idea that North American jobs are not worth fighting for, that more than 3 million good jobs have disappeared.

As you know, whatever the result in the U.S. elections, it will greatly affect what happens in Canada. It could also affect Canadian jobs and ultimately Canadian laws.

In solidarity,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "R. Thomas Buffenbarger".

R. Thomas Buffenbarger
International President

