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EVERY  
STEWARD  
SHOULD  
REMEMBER

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# Fifteen Things Every Steward Should Remember

## 1 You don't have to be an expert.

Stewards are always being asked questions. Don't act like you know what you're talking about when you don't — your friends and your co-workers will see through it right away. Say you'll find out, and get back to them.

## 2 Figure out where to turn for answers.

Your union officers and staff should be knowledgeable in contract interpretation and many areas of labor law. Other union activists can be important people to rely on. And depending on where you work, on the job there are undoubtedly a few people who work in different offices or departments who know more than anyone what goes on behind management's closed doors.

## 3 Knowing how to delegate tasks is your most important skill.

Recruiting volunteers is an easily learned skill. Some people do it naturally, others benefit from specific training in recruiting or team-building.

## 4 If you try to do it all yourself, it won't work.

You won't be able to do anything as well as you could, you'll get frustrated, and then you'll burn out. The more people you get involved, the more you can accomplish.

## 5 Your job is to empower people.

Give a man a fish, he'll eat for a day. Teach a man to fish, he'll eat for a lifetime. If all you do is solve other people's problems for them, what are they going to do when you're not there? Help

people learn how to solve their own problems.

## 6 Ask a lot of questions.

Socrates didn't become famous for nothing. The best ideas come from picking a lot of people's brains and getting them to think about old problems in new ways.

## 7 Learn how to listen.

With grievances and personnel problems, sometimes just being willing to listen is the most important thing you can do. When you're organizing you need to know how other people feel and how they view the situation before you can influence them. Ask and listen.

## 8 Don't let management treat you like pond scum.

When you're representing your co-workers as their union steward you are co-equal with the supervisor you're dealing with. You're both intelligent adults. On the job, your supervisor may have authority over you. But on union business, you're his or her equal.

## 9 Never assume that management knows better than you.

Most supervisors have little understanding of contract rights or labor law. They have experience in program or production and in supervision. Anything you learn about employees' rights on the job makes you more of an expert in that area than they are.

## 10 Pick your fights.

Defending your fellow employees is an important part of a union steward's job, but if that's all you do you're

always on the defensive. If you identify issues and take the initiative to demand changes, you'll make important progress. Don't let management control the agenda. Be pro-active and pick the issues that you think you can make some headway on.

## 11 Always get back to people.

If you want your co-workers to have trust in you, you've got to be responsible and reliable. Don't promise things you can't deliver on, and be sure to follow through on what you do commit to.

## 12 Be organized in your own life.

Pick a system and keep to it. How are you going to keep track of appointments and meetings? Where are you going to keep notes and reminders to yourself? Throw out papers you don't need, and have a good system for finding the stuff you keep.

## 13 Be a responsible employee on the job.

Not only is this important if you want your co-workers to have respect for you and your opinion, but it keeps you from getting into unnecessary trouble with management.

## 14 Maintain a sense of humor.

On the one hand, ridicule can be a powerful weapon against an irrational supervisor. On the other, don't take yourself too seriously. If you get self-righteous you won't learn from your mistakes and you'll turn people off.

## 15 Keep your eyes on the prize.

There will be setbacks. There will be losses. Sometimes people will get angry at you, and sometimes you'll start to wonder if it's all worth it. But as long as you remember that collective action is the only real way to change things for the better, you'll know that in the long run, helping to build the union is the best thing you can be doing — for yourself and your family.

— Tom Israel. The writer is executive director of the Montgomery County (MD) Education Association and former president of SEIU Local 205 in Nashville, TN. A version of this article appeared in *Steward Update* Vol. 4 No. 3.

# Seniority and Ability in Promotions and Layoffs

**C**ontract language that deals with workers' rights in promotion or layoff situations is an important part of any agreement. But because one worker's advancement or continuing employment can mean disappointment for someone else, the steward can be caught between the winner and the loser. For that reason, among others, it's important for stewards to understand some basic issues that have an impact in interpreting what a given seniority clause means. Let's start out by looking at some terms.

## Defining Seniority

*Strict Seniority* clauses require the employer to give preference to the worker with the longest continuous service, without regard to any other conditions. Employers tend to object strenuously to these clauses because they encroach too much on their ability to manage as they wish, so they are rarely seen.

*Modified Seniority* clauses allow the employer some latitude to also take into account qualifications or ability. These include:

- **Relative ability.** These provide that the senior employee will be given preference if he or she possesses fitness and ability *equal* to that of junior employees. Seniority becomes a determining factor only if the qualifications of the bidders are equal. It is a subjective determination, since "equal" is not precisely measured. If the employer says that the junior employee has superior ability, then it would be expected that the employer must prove it.
- **Sufficient ability.** Here, the senior employee gets the job if he or she possesses *sufficient* ability to perform the job. With this language it is only necessary to show that the senior bidder is capable of doing the job, regardless of how much more competent another person is. This

may be important during recall from layoffs, where the employer wants to bring back a younger, and, in the employer's view, more talented person. The union only need show that the worker has demonstrated sufficient ability to handle the job in the past.

*Hybrid* clauses are the most difficult to challenge, since they state that "seniority and qualifications shall govern," or "due consideration shall be given to length of service, aptitude and ability" without indicating the weight to be given each element. With these clauses, seniority is only one of several considerations to be taken into account.

## Is the worker qualified?

Arbitrators have over the years been offered various kinds of "proof" that an employee is qualified. The union needs to be prepared to challenge management's contentions when they disagree with them. Some of the measures of ability, including testing and broad assessment, follow.

## Tests

Management is entitled to give reasonable and appropriate written, oral, performance, aptitude, and physical abilities tests that supposedly predict future performance. But these tests must meet certain requirements:

- The test must relate to the skill and knowledge required by the job.
- It must be "fair and reasonable" and cover all relevant factors. The questions cannot be unduly difficult and cannot favor one or another of the applicants.
- The test must be fairly administered, graded and uniformly applied, and must be given to all applicants for the job.

The company cannot give a junior employee an unfair advantage by temporarily assigning him or her to the job shortly before the test is given.

- Arbitrators generally expect that the employer also take other factors or other evidence into account as well. They strongly disfavor basing an employment decision on tests alone, since this may discriminate against otherwise qualified workers who may have an educational or other disadvantage.

Other factors which may be taken into account include:

- **Experience.** The extent to which an employee has already engaged in the type of work, job, or occupation.
- **Trial period.** The best way of determining whether an employee can perform a job is to give him or her a trial period, but employers may not like to offer one. Arbitrators have gone both ways on the issue of whether trial periods should be offered.
- **Merit rating.** Arbitrators may look at merit rating as an aid in judging fitness and ability, but such ratings should not be excessively relied upon.
- **Educational background.** This is an important consideration, but it must be demonstrated there is a link between job requirements and the education or training being evaluated.
- **Production records.** Arbitrators have regarded production records as evidence of employee fitness.
- **Attendance records.** These may be considered at least one of the factors to determine fitness and ability.

The preceding are major considerations that go into determining fitness and ability. But remember that the contract is the most important determinant of who is going to get the job, and discrimination based on gender or age should be guarded against.

— George Hagglund. The writer is professor emeritus at the University of Wisconsin - Madison.

# Communicating Across Cultures

**C**ommunication is the key to so many things a steward does, and good communication skills are something experienced stewards develop. But even experienced stewards have special challenges when the communication is between people of different cultures. (By “culture” we mean common experiences, understandings, ways of thinking, feeling, acting and communicating.)

Chances are your workplace has gotten more diverse in recent years. Whether you’re working around people from many parts of the globe or just different parts of the country, or in some cases maybe even just your city, you are likely to find that there are different cultures among your co-workers.

When people from different cultures try to communicate sometimes there are misunderstandings or, worse, hard feelings. If you find that you are not connecting with all your members, especially those who are different from you, these tips on cross cultural communications may be of help.

## Learn About Different Cultures and Values

The first thing you may want to do is learn about the different cultures in your workplace. This can be done by reading, surfing the internet or simply asking your co-workers about themselves.

You may learn some interesting, fascinating and very helpful things. For example, people from Russia or other former Communist countries are often suspicious of unions based on the role unions played in their former homes. On the other hand, people from the West Indies might be impatient with the union because in their home countries unions

have more rights and support.

To avoid misunderstandings, learn the various customs your co-workers may have in personal exchanges like shaking hands, making eye contact and speaking out in groups.

One caution: Knowing about a culture is just a guide that might help you understand and relate to someone from that culture. Do not look for a “roadmap” for relating to everyone from a particular culture. Everyone’s different, and someone with a background in a certain culture may not display all or even any of the aspects of that culture. Beware of stereotypes.

**To avoid misunderstandings, learn the various customs your co-workers may have in personal exchanges**

## Take Time, Listen, Paraphrase

Good listening is always vital, but it is especially important when communicating with someone from a different culture. Let the person finish his or her thoughts. Do not form any conclusions until

you are sure you really understand what was said and done. Relax, be flexible, and be open to the possibility that your co-worker is using words in ways different from the way you do.

Be prepared to respectfully ask for clarification or further explanation. For example: “I want to make sure I understand what you are saying. You said the supervisor wasn’t polite. Can you give me an example?”

A good skill to use is paraphrasing. This is when you repeat back to a person what you think you heard him or her say. For example: “What I hear you saying is the supervisor raised his voice to you and used swear words, is that right?”

## Work on Your Delivery

When talking, be aware of how you might

sound to someone who is not familiar with certain words, gestures and tones. Avoid slang, jargon or initials that everyone may not understand. Also remember that sarcasm and many jokes don’t translate well across cultures, and adjust your delivery accordingly.

Take your time and look for cues as to whether your listeners are understanding what you’re saying, or if they are confused or offended. Perhaps your hand gestures make them uncomfortable or give a message that you didn’t intend. Maybe they don’t know what the labor board is and aren’t comfortable enough to ask. Perhaps you used a common expression without realizing that it has negative racial, ethnic or sexual overtones.

Try to create a comfortable atmosphere and ask for feedback to see what your listeners are getting from your delivery. Do not just ask if they understand, because many people will say yes even if they really do not. Ask open-ended questions about the content of your message. For example: “What has been your experience with the new rule we have been discussing?”

## Develop Empathy

Understand and appreciate the world view of others. Don’t assume that the way you see or do things is “normal” and they are the odd ones. Respect and learn from the differences.

And, finally, a twist on the golden rule. What you find acceptable may not be appropriate for everyone. For example: In a class I taught for members of a health care union I found that many people were calling each other, “Mr.” or “Mrs.” or “Ms.,” while I much preferred to have people use my first name. In that case my golden rule was “treat others as they want to be treated.”

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



**T**here's nothing like humor to lighten your load, and, often, to make a point. Here are a few classic labor jokes and stories that stewards find especially appropriate. Enjoy!

# Steward Smiles



## The Ultimate "Free Rider"

There once was a worker who would never join a union. All his life he accepted the benefits the union won for him, but he refused to join and pay dues.

He grew old, living comfortably on what the union had been able to achieve at his workplace. Finally, death approached, and he made a request of his wife. "Please arrange for union members to be my pallbearers."

His startled wife responded, "You never belonged to the union. Why do you want union members to be your pallbearers?"

He responded, "I figure they've carried me this far, they might as well carry me the rest of the way."

## White Collar Vs. Blue Collar

It was about 100 degrees that day and the ironworkers were working on the eighth floor of an office building under construction in the heart of downtown. One of the ironworkers sat down to eat lunch and spotted a clerk gesturing to him from the building across the way.

The clerk had written a note which he was holding up to his office window with a superior and smug look on his face. The note bragged, "It's 70 degrees in here."

The building tradesman smiled and reached into his lunchbox and wrote a note on his napkin. He held it up for the clerk to read:

"It's \$30 an hour out here."

— Compiled by Saul Schneiderman, president of the Library of Congress Professional Guild, AFSCME Local 2910.

## Don't Forget the Details.

Believe it or not, the first shop steward was Ben Hur and, like many of today's stewards, he learned his craft in the School of Hard Knocks.

You remember the movie *Ben Hur*: he was captured and forced to work as an oarsman in the hold of a Roman ship. The conditions were terrible. Besides having to row day and night, the oarsmen lived in filth and squalor.

Soon after Ben Hur was captured and thrown in the hold, he began to stand up for the rights of the oarsmen. He won their respect and was elected to represent them. Their first demand was reasonable — a much-needed change of underwear. How could they continue working with underwear that hadn't been changed in years?

Ben Hur set up a meeting with the ship's commander. He then experienced something that rarely happens — he won his first grievance! The commander listened and agreed. The men would get a change of underwear.

The next day the commander went down to the hold and called all the oarsmen together. "All right," he said, "you will now receive your change of underwear. Each of you take off your underwear and exchange it with the man sitting next to you."

He looked at Ben Hur, smiled and said: "Next time, don't forget the details."

## Never Satisfied

After days of tough negotiations, the senior shop steward emerged from behind closed doors looking very pleased with himself. Addressing the workers, he declared the results: the bargaining committee had negotiated a 25 percent wage hike, two months paid vacation, full dental coverage, and two hours for lunch. "And furthermore," he concluded triumphantly, "you only have to work one day a week — Wednesday."

"What?" asked the voice from the back of the room, "Every Wednesday?"

## Psalm of the non-unionist

The dues paying member is my shepherd. I shall not want. He provideth me with rest days and vacations so that I may lie down in green pastures beside the still waters. He restoreth my back pay, He guideth my welfare without cost to me.

I stray in the paths of the non-righteous for my money's sake.

Yea, though I alibi and pay no dues from generation to generation I fear no evil, for he protects me. The working conditions which he provides, they comfort me.

He annointeth my head with the oil of vacations, sick pay, holidays and a pension. He representeth me in grievances.

And my cup runneth over with ingratitude. Surely his goodness and loving kindness shall follow me all the days of my life without cost to me.

And I shall dwell in his house forever and allow him to foot the bill.



**International  
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OFFICE OF THE INTERNATIONAL PRESIDENT

Brothers and Sisters,

As this edition of the IAM Educator went to press, more than 1,000 IAM activists were gearing up for the IAM Organizing Summit in Chicago, Illinois. There, IAM leaders from all over North America worked together to create a comprehensive, strategic organizing plan to help grow the ranks of the IAM. The theme of the Organizing Summit was "IAM POWER," which stands for Proudly Organizing Workers and Ensuring Representation. That is exactly what we will do.

This great union is at a crossroads, Brothers and Sisters, and in order for us to retain the clout we have built over the years it is imperative that we organize new members. With the approval of the Organizing Fund, delegates at the 2004 Grand Lodge Convention in Cincinnati, Ohio took the first step to point our union on a path to growth. Now it is time for all of us to join in the effort to make organizing the central part of our job as union representatives.

I know all the hard work that goes into being a shop steward. You are, without a doubt, the best around. But, times are changing and it is no longer enough just to be a good shop steward. We need your help to grow this union.

In this newsletter you will read about what it takes to be a good shop steward, including understanding seniority and communicating across cultures. But remember, now is the time to be great shop stewards. When you talk to members on the shop floor, ask them for organizing leads – the names of friends and workers who could use a strong, clean and effective union like the IAM. Remind them that it will take the effort of an ever-growing union to overcome corporate greed and a presidential administration intent on destroying organized labor.

Thank you for all you do to make this union great and please keep up the good work.

In appreciation and solidarity,

R. Thomas Buffenbarger  
International President

