

# TAMI

EDUCATOR

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## Take Control of Your Time



# Take Control of Your Time

**S**urveys of Americans on the job reveal that most people only work about eight or nine minutes before they are interrupted by something. Most likely, it's the phone, or someone stopping by to ask a "quick" question. Some interruptions can be important and some may be time-wasters, but the net result is the same — attempts at concentrated effort consistently fail.

Your work as a union steward probably suffers from the same problem. How many times have you tried to concentrate on a grievance or other issue only to have the phone ring or someone interrupt "just for a minute"?

## Time to Think and Plan

Sure, it's your job to be available to help the people you work with — but even the most conscientious steward recognizes the need for uninterrupted time to think, write and plan.

Take heart. With just a few simple strategies, you can stem the tide of interruptions that keep you from working effectively.

It's a good idea to begin by keeping track of your interruptions for a few days. Create a simple record by dividing a sheet of paper into three columns. Each time you are interrupted while performing union work, write in the first column what you were trying to do. In the second column, note what the interruption was — a phone call, going to make copies, a drop-in visitor, whatever. Briefly note the content of the interruption in the third column.

Within a few days you should have a fair idea of what your interruptions are. Then you can determine which ones you may be able to eliminate and which ones you can anticipate.

Maybe you interrupt yourself by not having all the materials you need when you sit down to work on a grievance. Or

you may stop working to make copies of union documents, or phone someone for additional information. You can eliminate these interruptions by organizing your time more efficiently. Group these kind of tasks together and get them out of the way before writing or beginning other work that demands concentration.

Maybe you're trying to work in the wrong place or at the wrong time. You may be too accessible to other workers, or too available to family members. Perhaps you should rethink your schedule, or move to a place with no phone — the public library, for example — when you have to focus on a difficult job.

## Anticipate Interruptions

At the same time, you may be able to anticipate some of your interruptions and head them off at the pass. If you get a lot of calls from people wanting to know the status of their grievances, for example, make it part of your routine to call everyone with a pending grievance. Periodically go down the list and leave messages or speak briefly to each grievant. In addition to stopping calls to you at inconvenient times, you'll also come across as super-efficient and thoughtful.

The same advice goes for interruptions from management, too. What do you do when a higher-up all of a sudden wants to talk to you on some union issue — and you're in the middle of trying to work out *another* pressing union concern? Remember that, when you're functioning as a steward, you are management's equal. That means you don't have to drop the union business you're working on just because a boss

wants to talk. Unless it's some kind of emergency, respectfully respond that you're right in the middle of a union matter at the moment but you'd be happy to talk to him in a minute or two or ten, whatever you need. Use your judgement, but remember that *you* control your work as steward, management doesn't.

Finally, brush up on some basic techniques for keeping those unavoidable interruptions brief. If someone comes to see you, stand up for the conversation. Chances are it will be shorter than if you both were seated.

On the phone, ask questions that can be answered simply yes or no rather than open-ended ones that encourage people to keep talking.

For example, when you want to wrap up a phone conversation, don't ask, "Is there anything else I can help you with?" Instead, ask, "Have we covered all the bases on this issue?" The answer may be yes, and you can end the conversation. Even if the answer is no, you will be able to move in a specific direction and be that much closer to getting off the phone.

Another strategy that works for a lot of stewards is to use e-mail in some situations. If you're looking for a specific piece of information, or want to deliver one, consider sending an e-mail instead of taking the time to search out the person you need to communicate with, either in person or by phone. An e-mail can keep an exchange short and sweet, while a phone call or personal visit runs the risk of going on and on. You obviously don't want to have all your interactions be as "distant" as via computer, but on occasion, e-mail could be the best way to go.

Remember to strike a balance between being a doormat — allowing anyone to interrupt you at any time — and being too abrupt. Remind your co-workers that you need to use your time efficiently to provide the best possible service. And when you take action to cut interruptions, you assert more control over your life and create time for yourself and what is important to you.

— Sue Dawson. The writer is a veteran labor journalist.



# How to Deal With a Timid Grievant

**S**ometimes, the steward's challenge is the worker who just can't wait to have the union file a grievance — even in cases where the facts make it clear that no legitimate grievance exists. The worker is so determined and aggressive and anxious for the union to take the boss to task that it'll make you crazy.

But just as difficult for the steward can be the mirror image of that scene: the worker who has been unfairly treated and whose case begs for justice... but he or she just doesn't want to do anything about it.

Stewards who are tuned into their workplaces will find out when something has happened to an employee. The question is, how do you effectively handle this situation?

## Reasons for Timidity

Let's first look at the reasons such workers do not come forward:

■ **Fear.** A worker fears retaliation from the boss if he or she speaks up. In today's "downsized" economy, many workers think they must quietly endure abuse to keep their jobs.

■ **Guilt.** The worker believes that he or she did something to provoke the incident. Even if that is true, the "punishment" may not fit the "crime."

■ **Shame.** The worker is ashamed of what happened and doesn't want anyone to know. This is common in sexual harassment situations even though the worker has done nothing wrong.

■ **Ignorance.** The worker doesn't realize that what happened is unjust, or doesn't know that the union can help make things right.

■ **Cynicism.** The worker doesn't believe that the union can do anything.

Secondly, it's important to understand that the union — not the individual

aggrieved worker — "owns" the grievance. Because the union bargains collectively for all the workers in the unit, it must take the action which best protects the interest of everyone. An injustice affecting one worker, left unchecked because the worker does not want to file a grievance, could potentially harm others because management likely will repeat it.

Managers sometimes make stewards think that they can't encourage workers

to file grievances or that a grievance can't be filed without the signature of the aggrieved worker. But a steward's right to solicit grievances and to file a grievance on behalf of the union are protected activities under Labor Board rulings.

## What to Do

Here are some suggestions for handling these situations:

■ Talk with the worker and find out what happened and why he or she is reluctant to file a grievance.

■ Use that opportunity to reassure the worker that he or she is not alone. Educate workers about their rights. For example, it is an unfair labor practice for a boss to threaten or retaliate against a worker for filing a grievance. Also explain that it is the union's responsibility to protect those rights for all the unit's workers. The union can only be effective with everyone's participation.

■ Explain — particularly to the cynic — your union's record on solving workplace problems. The more participation, the more pressure on management to stay in line.

■ Explain that if the union just stands by and lets management get away with the grievance, the worker likely will be targeted again, and the boss will feel free to target other workers too.

**Don't let one worker's fear weaken other workers' rights.**

■ Surely other workers have felt reluctant in the past to file grievances. Have them relate their experiences to the worker.

■ If the worker won't budge, determine if there's a better way to solve his or her problem other than filing a formal grievance. But if filing a grievance turns out to be the best strategy, inform the worker of that decision.

■ Get the entire unit to sign the grievance as a way to both reassure the worker and drive home the message that participating in your union means you are never alone.

Stewards who involve members in union activities that make the union visible and deal with workplace issues in creative and fun ways are more likely to create an environment where workers will come forward if they are treated unjustly.

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

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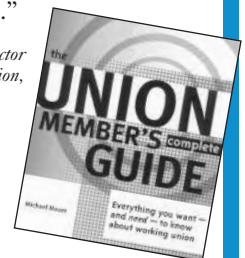
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# Late for Work Again!

It's only human to be late for work on occasion, but when those occasions become too numerous, people get into trouble.... and when people get into trouble, it usually means work for stewards. Stewards frequently find themselves having to defend workers being disciplined for being late, and sorting out fair vs. unfair discipline can be a tough job.

Employers have come up with all sorts of rules to justify what is too much tardiness, and under what circumstances they will excuse or discipline a worker who is habitually late. A common way of handling it is the point system, under which workers are assessed points for lateness or absenteeism under what is considered a "no fault" system. Reprimands, suspension, and discharge all occur automatically according to the number of points assessed. But even this system is not foolproof, so stewards must be ready to defend co-workers against unfair disciplines.

Following are some sample arbitration decisions that illustrate some of the problems you might run into.

## **No Fault Attendance Policy**

A union worker was discharged after reporting late for work for the fourth time in less than four months. The arbitrator upheld the company's action. There had been numerous counselings concerning the no fault attendance policy, and the grievant admitted at the hearing that he understood when he got the letter that any time lost in the next 60 days would result in discharge. Still, he incurred two more occurrences in the next 40 days.

Another employee was fired for tardiness after receiving written warnings and two suspensions. The arbitrator disagreed with the company, and put her back to work with a 30-day suspension. He said she had gone almost 10 months without being tardy, and termination didn't square with the standard of just cause: workers should not remain subject to discharge irrespective of the passage of time since the last incident.

An employee was fired under the

employer's attendance policy for accumulating 5-plus points for unexcused absences within a 90-day rolling period -- for the fifth time. The arbitrator agreed with the company: the worker had been given less severe progressive discipline penalties for earlier offenses. He said a factor in being late was that he had recurrence of pain from a previous work injury, but the arbitrator noted he failed to report the recurrence until after he was late. A joint peer review committee specified in the grievance procedure found justification for the dismissal. The employee's claim he worked overtime the day before and suffered ongoing pain that he remedied by taking drugs that "knocked him out" did not excuse tardiness the next day. And further, he had not filed grievances for earlier tardiness and absence disciplines.

## **"Union Activity" Claim Didn't Help**

A truck driver was fired after the fourth time he reported late for work. The arbitrator upheld the discharge even though the aggrieved claimed he was singled out for his union activities due to the manager's personal animosity. The arbitrator said that the infractions were real and admitted, although trivial; the employer recorded tardiness of any length, and disciplined all violators.

## **Unacceptable Doctor's Statement**

A worker who was fired for tardiness claimed that his friend had turned off his alarm clock, and he had been ill. The arbitrator let the dismissal stand. The excuse concerning the alarm clock could be introduced as evidence, but the doctor's note concerning the employee's illness was obtained after the discharge and based only on what the aggrieved told his doctor.

## **Progressive Discipline**

An employee was suspended for 2 days after being tardy 24 times and absent 14

times in one year. The arbitrator agreed with the company, saying the employee did not improve during the year after she was advised, counseled, and then given a written reprimand. He said she was not treated disparately, in that no other employee showed any record approaching her tardiness.

## **No Due Process**

A worker was fired for repeated tardiness. The arbitrator put him back to work, but with a four-month loss of pay. He noted that the company had failed to give the grievant a final letter of warning as called for by the company's own progressive discipline policy.

## **Good Previous Record**

A female worker was fired for tardiness and failure to report for work. The arbitrator put her back on the job, but without back pay. He noted she had a good record for 22 years, and had emotional problems during the previous year. He said the lost wages would impress upon her the need to conform to standards of conduct.

## **Docking Pay Uncalled For**

A worker came in seven minutes late for a shift and was docked pay. The arbitrator said that was a contract violation and ordered the pay restored. The company's rule on docking pay for lateness had never been placed on record.

## **"Visiting Children"**

An employee was discharged for excessive tardiness. The employee said he was visiting his children in a distant location. The arbitrator reduced the penalty to suspension and final warning, noting the grievant had been frequently tardy but never previously penalized. His latenesses were for more minutes than others, but insufficient to warrant discharge.

**Even "point systems" are not foolproof, so stand ready to defend against unfair disciplines.**

# Food for Thought

**T**ake a moment to check out what some great (and occasionally not so great) minds have had to say on work, solidarity, unionism, poverty, power — and more. Call it inspiration or call it entertainment, just a little bit can go a long way.

**“When a man tells you that he got rich through hard work, ask him whose.”**

—Donald Robert Perry Marquis (1878–1937)

**“What a union representative should never forget is the power of the men behind him.”**

—Harry Bridges (1901–1990),  
longshore workers union leader

**“Labor solidarity has no borders.”**

—labor muralist Mike Alowitz, 1990

**“No gains without pains.”**

—Benjamin Franklin (1706–1790)

**“An injury to one is the concern of all.”**

—Terence Powderly (1849–1924), leader, Knights of Labor

**“The strength of a labor group remains within its own hands. No sort of legislation will work for weak unions. ‘Them as has, gets.’”**

—journalist Heywood Broun (1888–1939), 1937

**“If hard work were such a wonderful thing, surely the rich would have kept it all to themselves”**

—AFL-CIO President Lane Kirkland (1922–1999)

**“It’s true hard work never killed anybody, but I figure, why take the chance.”**

—President Ronald Reagan (1911–2004), 1987

**“The best answer is for the people to cut down on their extravagance. They should eat less.”**

—President Herbert Hoover (1874–1964), during the Great Depression

**“When the rich concern themselves with the poor, that’s called charity. When the poor concern themselves with the rich, that’s called revolution.”**

—Machinists President William Winpisinger (1924–1997), 1981



**“The only people whose names are recorded in history are those who did something. The peaceful and indifferent are forgotten; they never know the fighting joy of living.”**

—Elizabeth Gurley Flynn (1890–1964), union organizer

**“Few politicians can resist the temptation of kicking the hell out of federal employees.”**

—Congressman William David Ford (1927–2004)

**“Power concedes nothing without a demand. It never did and it never will.”**

—abolitionist Frederick Douglass (1818–1895)

**“I think American labor unions get a large share of the credit for making us a middle-class country.”**

—columnist George F. Will, 1977

**“Capitalism is the extraordinary belief that the nastiest of men, for the nastiest of reasons, will somehow work for the benefit of us all.”**

—economist John Maynard Keynes (1883–1946)

**“Politics is the science of who gets what, when and why.”**

—Sidney Hillman (1887–1946), president, Amalgamated Clothing Workers

**“Sit down and read. Educate yourself for the coming conflicts.”**

—union organizer Mary Harris “Mother” Jones (1830–1930)

—From Great Labor Quotations Sourcebook and Reader, by Peter Bollen. Used by permission.

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OFFICE OF THE INTERNATIONAL PRESIDENT

Brothers and Sisters,

As we pass the halfway point of 2008, it's time to focus on the busy months ahead. Delegates have been elected and preparations are well under way for the 37th Grand Lodge Convention in Orlando, Florida in September, 2008.

Economists may debate whether the economy is in recession, but working families across North America know that these are not good times. Homes are falling into foreclosure, health care is becoming unaffordable and gas and food prices are going through the roof, with no end in sight.

The next president and the next Congress will have a lot of problems to solve. Who we elect to make those decisions will determine whether things get better or worse for middle-class workers. Without elected officials who are looking out for the best interests of working families, the situation will only get worse. As a steward, you play an important role in getting pro-labor candidates elected.

Educate your fellow members and make sure all the candidates speak to the issues impacting the middle class. Do we want elected officials who will lower gas prices or make even more profits for oil companies? Do we want real solutions to health care or more stalemate that leaves everyone in fear of losing their coverage? It's up to us to get out and register our members to vote and get them to the polls. We made a great start in 2006 and we need to finish the job in November 2008.

This edition of the *IAM Educator* provides you with information on dealing with tardiness disciplines, ways to deal with a timid grievant, how to best manage your time, and what some great minds have had to say on work, solidarity, unionism, poverty, power — and more.

I want to thank you for the outstanding service you provide your brothers and sisters in the IAM. Your commitment as shop stewards keeps the IAM moving forward.

In Solidarity,

R. Thomas Buffenbarger  
International President

