

TAMI

E D U C A T O R

Update for Stewards

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A New Look at Stewards and Communications



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In the years leading up to the American Revolution, patriots like Samuel Adams realized that fast and accurate communications among the colonies were essential to building a strong movement. Stewards should learn from this history to pull together scattered, and sometimes quarreling, members by setting up their own effective communications network, using some of the new technology that's so popular.

Central to all steward-member communications is the concept of "Reporting back" — that is, giving union members up-to-date information on grievances and other important concerns. This is something that is a big problem for a lot of union locals. One reason: the "normal" workplace, with regular hours of work and location, has gone the way of the manual typewriter. Not only are shifts running at all hours, but larger locals or districts, created by merging separate bargaining units, mean more work areas at more locations and often more shifts for a steward or local officer to cover.

A Way Around Stretched Resources

Local union resources are often stretched. The usual methods of distributing report-back information — the leaflets passed out at the time clock, the bulletin board postings, even the informal workplace meetings — get overwhelmed. As more locals are faced with layoffs, it has also become prohibitively expensive to prepare, print and mail out printed newsletters.

If we learned anything from the presidential campaign of Barack Obama, it is how new technology can be used to not only distribute information but to get people active and to make them feel involved. Many of the same techniques and devices can be used by union stew-

ards to motivate their members. While every local union should have a web site, many do not or have let it fall behind, like a weedy vacant lot. Notices issued by the local officers are often delayed, so it's a good thing for stewards to step up and create their own communications networks.

Some Basic Steps

How to do it? The first step most stewards take is setting up an e-mail list to distribute union information, but there are a couple of obstacles to this practice. If you work in a location where workers are regularly on computers, it would be ideal to simply send out union information through this network. But the use of company computers for union business is a constant source of controversy, even in unionized workplaces. The next step is getting the home e-mail addresses for the members so the union material can be distributed through a personal listserv. A problem there, however, is that many members do not routinely check their e-mails, so important material can sit in the in-box for days, even when immediate action is needed.

A steward, then, needs direct ways to quickly communicate with individual members about important issues. New technology — cell phones, text messages, even Facebook and YouTube — opens up wonderful opportunities for the imaginative union representative.

Some stewards have already moved into the electronic age by setting up departmental communications networks to the members' cell phones. One steel-worker chief steward averages 3,000 text messages a month in his mill of about 700 workers—many of them messages to individuals, many others to hundreds of workers at a time. The messages are simple, such as reporting back on shop issues,

requesting information to support grievances, reminders of local meetings. But simple though the messages may be, they help maintain a general dialogue among workers who often never see each other because of complicated shift assignments and widely separated work locations. So many of his members already have — and pay for — unlimited texting that the union notices come, in effect, for free.

Another steward has set up a Google group so members can trade experiences and opinions, within the structure of the union. While the group hears the usual differences of opinion that are usually expressed loudly in the bathrooms and breakrooms, at least the differences are out in the open where other members can answer them. These groups can be password-protected to prevent the boss from snooping.

In pushing for stewards to begin using the new technology, the so-called "digital divide" always arises: the split between union stewards who are comfortable using new technology and those who are not, often sneered at as "Luddites" by some of their own members, usually the younger ones. A basic quality of a great union steward is the willingness and ability to learn new things, but often stewards are older, with greater seniority, and may not feel comfortable with the new technology.

Learning the Hard Way

One local president in a building trades local learned the hard way about the importance of new technology. When a controversial amendment to the local bylaws came up for a vote, the officer prepared to make the presentation at the local meeting. While he was thinking about his presentation at the meeting, however, an informal network among the members — texting each other back and forth — ignited a storm of protest and brought a packed meeting, which rejected the proposal.

The lesson is that union members are organizing themselves with the new technology, so there is really no choice for a steward but to figure it out and put it to the union's advantage.

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

Grievance Interviewing

Workers bring all kinds of problems and concerns to their union stewards, and an issue is rarely cut-and-dried. Often, it's only through effective interviewing and investigation that the steward can get all the information and facts needed to totally understand and work out a solution to the problem.

**Make sure
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bases are
covered.**

There's a tried-and-true way to handle the interview stage of the process, and even the most veteran steward might find it useful to review his or her practices to make sure all bases are covered.

The Five Ws

Stewards know that the key to good interviewing skills is the process of getting — and writing down — information by using the “five Ws”:

- **WHO** is the worker? (the basics of name, job title, employee number, shift, seniority, etc.); WHO witnessed the incident or was involved in the situation? WHO are the management people involved?
- **WHAT** happened or failed to happen? WHAT did the worker(s) do? WHAT did management say, do, or fail to do? WHAT's happened in the past that could have contributed to the situation (including any past “run-ins” or disciplines)? WHAT should be done? (the remedy)
- **WHEN** did the incident happen? (date, time)
- **WHERE** did the incident happen? (location). WHERE do we go from here? (what are the next steps the steward will take to follow up after the interview).
- **WHY** did the incident happen? (this question often generates more opinion than fact, but it is important and the steward should dig for the facts)

Stewards new to interviewing often find it useful to write these questions out ahead of time and have them in hand when doing the interview. Don't be embarrassed by having a “script” — it demonstrates your preparation. Be sure to make notes during interviews, because memories are tricky and you're likely to forget a key fact—or, for a busy steward, confuse one grievance case with another. Your union may provide some type of interview form you can use.

More than “Just the Facts”

Experienced stewards know that a good interview goes beyond a “just the facts, ma'am” encounter. A good interview is a two-way communication that collects information, demonstrates the union's concern, and involves the worker in taking responsibility to analyze the issue. Remember, as well, that you are the “official” face of the union, and should want the worker to feel confident in the union's ability to represent members.

Here are some tips to make your interview more effective:

- 1 Choose the right place and time for the interview.** A convenient, quiet place when you're not both rushed is best. You want to be out of hearing of everyone, management and co-workers alike. You want the worker's side of the story at this point: later, if appropriate, you can interview others.
- 2 Actively listen.** Encourage the worker to talk freely — it's important for a worker to “vent” feelings initially. Something has upset the worker enough to ask the union for help, so stay tuned in to that emotion but don't let it rule the entire interview. Convey an open and attentive attitude. Say little except to make good use of phrases such as “I understand” or “Could you tell me more?”
- 3 Direct the interview.** Once the worker's feelings are out, tactfully steer the conversation to what you

still need to know. Build on what the worker has already said by repeating his or her own phrases. This technique indicates that you did listen and would like him or her to talk more about that area. For example, the worker may say: “My supervisor was always checking up on me.” The steward's response should be: “You say your supervisor was always checking on you? Tell me about that,” then wait for the worker to share additional information.

4 “Is there anything else . . .” Experienced stewards know these two truths: Bad things happen to good workers and bad things happen to not-so-good workers. So when you think you have heard the whole story, ask the question “Is there anything else I need to know about what happened?” Your open, prepared approach throughout the interview sets the stage for trust with the worker so he or she is more likely to share if there is “more.” It's a good time to know if there's “more.”

5 Weighing alternatives. Once you've heard the worker's feelings and obtained the facts, the two of you may want to explore possible solutions to the problem. Even though you may have ideas about what to do next, ask the worker what he or she thinks should be done. Examine suggested solutions with the worker by asking, “What effect would that action have on you, on your supervisor, or on your co-workers?” Talk it out. If there's additional information you need — a department policy or some other document — involve the worker in the information gathering.

You may succeed in involving the worker in solving the problem or developing an action plan that is truly his or her own. That's a much more satisfying and empowering experience than the steward “solving” the problem for the worker — and empowerment is the essence of being union.

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

Leaving Work Without Permission

Why can't I leave the job before the end of the shift, as long as it doesn't hurt my employer? What's the harm?"

As you may have guessed, management is likely to have a different answer to that question than workers would...and a lot of workers end up in big trouble because of it. The arbitration record indicates it is quite common for workers to get fired for leaving the job without permission. To help in these situations stewards need to have a good understanding of employer rules, how other workers were treated under similar circum-

stances, and the nature of the job performed by the worker who's in trouble.

Here are a few examples of what arbitrators see as allowable — and not.

Continuous Operation

An elevator operator left his post for 2½ hours after being told that the production line would not be operating during his shift. He was fired. The arbitrator upheld the discharge because the employee should have known that a 2½ hour break was excessive, a backup of finished product occurred at the elevator while he was absent, and he had not previously responded to progressive discipline.

Another employee left work early without permission and was fired. The arbitrator reduced the penalty to a 3-day suspension because he had waited a time for his relief man to appear before leaving, and a 3-day suspension was more appropriate for his misconduct.

Another worker was suspended for leaving his post at the end of his shift

without waiting for his relief person to show up. The arbitrator voided the suspension because, he said, no one had told the worker to stay for overtime, and he had a record of working overtime if asked. Additionally, the employer built his case on hearsay evidence, and did not

have a preponderance of evidence proving that the worker should have been suspended.

Union Activist

A union activist who was in a meeting called by the company to discuss the need to complete shifts without leaving early was fired for walking off the

job. The arbitrator said he was discharged for just cause. The activist had lost his temper in the meeting, shouted obscenities in the presence of other workers, and then walked off. The arbitrator said the worker's overall behavior was such that discharge was appropriate.

New Rule

After a long period of non-enforcement, a company decided to start enforcing a rule governing leaving work without permission. The union filed a grievance. The arbitrator sided with the union, saying that the company had gone along with non-enforcement for a long time. In addition, the company had tried and failed to modify the contract in negotiations.

Provide Prior Warning

A worker new to the job was fired for leaving his post to tour the plant and eat his lunch. The arbitrator reinstated him without back pay, noting that even though the worker should have known it

was improper, the employer didn't make him aware it was a discharge offense.

Another worker was given a disciplinary warning for leaving work early. He filed a grievance, but the arbitrator sided with the company, noting he had previously been given a "friendly warning" that leaving work early was not tolerated. He said that even though "friendly warning" was not stated in the rules, it was an indication that the employee had been warned that such behavior would not be tolerated.

Accepted Past Practice

An employee was spotted in a liquor store 25 miles away from the plant during his shift. He was fired. The arbitrator reinstated him, noting there was a past practice of allowing workers to leave the plant during downtime, and the employee had not been charged with breaking the rule regarding possession of intoxicants on company property.

Follow Progressive Discipline

A worker with 26 years of service was fired for walking off the job without permission. The arbitrator put him back to work, noting the employer had failed to impose progressive discipline properly and was inconsistent in application of the rule, which failed to convey a clear warning that such behavior would result in discharge.

In conclusion, there is a set of principles regarding how to handle leaving the job without permission. In general, workers in continuous production jobs are expected to be there and perform until they have been relieved. Workers who can leave the job without harming the employer are given a bit more flexibility, but are expected to follow the rules. Employers have to enforce rules consistently if they expect to discipline employees effectively. Employers are expected to apply progressive discipline in a consistent manner, with warnings first, then progressive discipline, and ultimately discharge.

— George Hagglund is professor emeritus at the School for Workers, University of Wisconsin–Madison.



Jobs of the Steward: a Quick Quiz



1 The steward should memorize the collective bargaining agreement and be able to recite any section.

- True False

2 The steward is limited to processing only those grievances brought to his or her attention by workers, rather than observing and acting upon violations on his own.

- True False

3 The steward should always have the grievant participate in the grievance procedure.

- True False

4 The steward should refuse to answer any questions about the last union meeting when asked by members who failed to attend. If asked a question, the steward should reply: "If you would attend the local's meetings, you would know what is happening."

- True False

5 The steward must remain an impartial participant in the resolution of grievances and cannot favor one grievant over another.

- True False

6 The steward should be familiar with the standing committees of his or her local union and know who chairs each of the committees.

- True False

7 The steward should never enter into a discussion of politics or legislation with any member, because this is a personal matter and could make the member angry at the union.

- True False

— Adapted from the manual, "Leadership Training for OCAW Stewards."

1. False. Nobody could be expected to memorize the agreement. However, the steward should be familiar with the contract and know how it has been interpreted by past grievance settlements and arbitration decisions.

2. False. As the union's first line of defense, the steward can and should act to file grievances when he or she discovers a wrongful action by the employer.

3. True. Keeping the grievant involved in all steps of the grievance procedure is the best way to gain a favorable settlement and avoid charges that the union did not fairly represent the grievant.

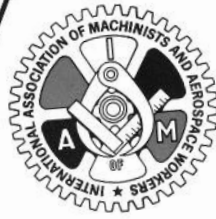
4. False. Sure, the members should attend the meetings, but the fact is many don't and the only way they'll learn what is going on is if the stewards share information with them.

5. True. The steward should be impartial and set examples of fairness and evenhanded treatment.

6. True. It is very important that the steward know the leadership of the local and understand the workings of all union committees. Stewards can't help their co-workers unless they know the different things the union does.

7. False. It is the steward's job to educate members on all matters which affect their working lives, including political and legislative issues.

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Dear Sisters and Brothers,

As the financial crisis roils economies across the globe, the devastating impact of mismanagement and unrestrained greed is hitting millions of workers and their families in North America. In the United States, unemployment is rapidly approaching 10 percent. And if you count people who have given up looking for work or are working involuntary part-time hours, more than 28 million Americans are now scrambling to make ends meet. In Canada, the grim picture is similar. The unemployment rate is at eight percent and the jobless rate is the highest in ten years.

The answer to this crisis in both countries can be summed up in two words, **JOBS Now!** We need to mobilize IAM members across North America to demand that both governments take immediate and meaningful action to create jobs, rebuild manufacturing, invest in infrastructure and implement skills training for tomorrow's economy.

Working families in North America can't wait any longer. Already meager unemployment benefits are running out, families are going to food banks in record numbers, homelessness is on the rise and hard-earned life savings are being wiped out. The pain is real and working families need action now.

Thousands of our brothers and sisters are losing their jobs and the prospect of joining the ranks of the unemployed looms for those who remain at work. Corporations are seizing the opportunity to go after wages, benefits and pensions like never before.

As Stewards, you must help lead the fight for **JOBS Now!** Mobilize your fellow members to contact their legislators to demand action. In the United States, we need a second stimulus package that focuses on immediate job creation in a Works Progress Administration-type program to rebuild manufacturing, create tax credits for investing in factories and machinery here at home, keep our defense sector strong, a real Buy-North American policy and tuition-free skills training.

In Canada, we need to demand that the government take immediate action to invest in the economy, create jobs and stave off further declines in manufacturing and other key sectors and also make serious improvements to Employment Insurance benefits and pension protection.

Brothers and sisters, we need action now. We need all of you to help. We must demand **JOBS Now!** for our members, their families and their communities. Our futures depend on it.

In Solidarity,

R. Thomas Buffenbarger

R. Thomas Buffenbarger
International President

