

BEING A GOOD STEWARD (PART 1)

The union steward is a:

- **Communicator**
- **Educator**
- **Organizer**
- **Grievance Handler**
- **Problem Solver**
- **Leader**

A steward has many important duties. At various times the steward will be called upon to exercise leadership, provide education and information, and organize and unionize the workforce. In addition, one of the most important jobs is to properly handle grievances.

Communicator

As the communication link, the steward notifies the members of all relevant meetings and encourages attendance; keeps the members informed about actions of the executive board, grievance committee or other decision-making bodies as well as day-to-day matters that affect the members; solicits opinions and communicates to the officers the feelings and concerns of the members on a regular basis; builds support for contract negotiations, executive board/ membership action, and workplace actions.

Educator

As an educator, the steward explains to members their rights and how to exercise them; explains the contract, grievance procedure, health and safety and other workplace regulations and protections, internal union procedures, and relevant laws.

Organizer

As an organizer, the steward welcomes and reaches out to new employees, provides an orientation to the union; mobilizes the members for tough grievance and contract fights; focuses on internal organizing, and assists in external organizing.

Grievance Handler

As the grievance handler, a steward speaks for the union and acts as the representative at the workplace; represents all workers in the bargaining unit fairly and without discrimination; acts as the primary contract enforcer and works to make management live up to the contract; listens to worker complaints; investigates, prepares, presents, and writes grievances.

Problem Solver

As a problem solver, the steward works to resolve problems before a worker is adversely affected or before the situation escalates to a grievance; develops relationships of respect and trust among the membership; works to develop open communications with the supervisor; refers workers with problems away from the job to an appropriate agency or program.

Leader

As part of the union leadership, you, the steward, take a visible, active role in decisions that affect workers; work with other stewards, grievance committee members, officers, and activists to represent the members and build the union.

WHAT DOES A STEWARD NEED TO KNOW?

- Co-Workers
- Local Union
- Contracts
- Department and the Jobs
- Supervisors
- Employer Policies/Personnel Manuals

Know Your Co-Workers:

As a steward, maintaining frequent personal contact with each worker in your group is important. You need to be aware of the different personalities in your workplace and might want to make it a habit to talk one on one or in small groups about the job and the workplace. In addition, it's important to know what is going on in the work units and keep in touch with the issues. Build an up-to-date list of names, addresses, email addresses and phone numbers, location, job title/classification, wage level, and hiring date of every bargaining unit member you are assigned to represent. Sometimes you may need to call or perhaps visit a member at home.

Know Your Local Union:

It is essential to know what the union wants and what it intends to do to get what it wants. You must know the processes in your state and be aware that important issues to the membership change over time depending on current conditions in the facility and the economy. It is also useful to know NRLCA policies and activities. Your copy of the NRLCA Magazine, Steward Link or other NRLCA resources can help with that.

Know Your Contract:

The contract is the agreement which sets the terms and conditions upon which labor and management agree to cooperate for a designated period of time. It is the set of rules which governs the behavior both of the worker on the job and the company; and it is your job as a steward to see to it that management lives up to the terms of the contract. A contract is subject to interpretation, and you interpret the contract to the best interests of the people you represent. Knowing how the contract language has been interpreted by past grievance settlements and arbitration decisions is important.

Get familiar with your contract - all its articles and sections. Your familiarity will not totally come from reading the contract or from trying to resolve a member's grievance. Some of it comes from discussion at steward and union meetings; other knowledge comes from talking over points with the union committee which negotiated the contract.

Probably, one of the most important preparations to make to be a good steward is to ensure access to reliable, timely and accurate information. Do not make the mistake of relying on one source to answer difficult questions. Do some research, double-check and verify accuracy. Do not make the mistake of assuming that because someone has an impressive position or an impressive title; they know what they are talking about and their answer can be relied on. Through a process of trial and error, find someone or some resource where you can get reliable, accurate and timely information and verification. How well you can do your job as steward will depend on the accuracy of your information. If you don't know that an answer is right, don't just say what pops into your head; get the right answer as soon as possible and get back to whoever asked with that answer and the source citation for the answer as soon as possible.

Know Your Post Office and the Jobs:

Most of the grievances you are asked to adjust will have their source in the post office or area you

serve. Thus, it is logical that you be well acquainted with that post office. The greater your knowledge about the workings of your post office, the less chance you have of being misled into a compromise settlement of a grievance.

Know the Supervisors:

Observe how the supervisor acts when discharging duties, how he or she reacts to grievances of one kind or another. Be particularly careful to form your own judgments about a supervisor instead of accepting somebody else's opinions.

Try to establish a relationship of trust with the managers you deal with. Be forthright when dealing with them. From the start, let them know that in performing your duties and responsibilities as a union representative, nothing is personal. Make a clear effort to ensure that if you can resolve issues, every effort will be made to avoid exposing the managers you are dealing with to serious repercussions should they resolve the issues you are discussing equitably and fairly. If serious consequences could fall on the manager, they have the right to know and be forewarned (oftentimes this will help to resolve the issues effectively and innovatively). When a manager is blindsided by adverse reaction from his/her superiors for sticking their "neck out"; it isn't likely to happen again. When they are forewarned or adverse reactions are taken into account, an equitable solution can build a problem-solving partnership based on trust that will pay dividends for all parties (win-win solutions). It is extremely important for the union representative to be a strong advocate for this relationship to be productive. If an equitable resolution is not possible without exposing either representative to extreme adverse reactions, an agreement to disagree and pass the grievance up to the next level is called for and oftentimes, with some positive input from the management side, the chances for an equitable settlement at the next level are significantly improved just by the input through channels on the management side.

Fair and responsible negotiations based on mutual respect and trust and especially when both parties know and understand their responsibility to live up to what they agree to; teach management that dealing with a strong but fair union representative is a win-win situation.

Know the Employer Policies and Employer Personnel Manuals:

Valuable information about company policies and other criteria will be found in these materials.

Know Pertinent Labor Laws:

Lastly, you may need to explain labor laws (see [Section 9](#)) to the members or recommend community services that are available to assist the member when the problem is out of the union's jurisdiction.

A summary checklist for approaching your role as a steward:

- Get to know co-workers, supervisors, other stewards.
- Listen to co-workers.
- Keep an open mind - evaluate each case on its own merits.
- Avoid favoritism; set standard for fairness.
- Vigorously enforce the contract and vigorously represent the workers.
- Investigate, evaluate, and try to resolve employee problems on an informal basis.
- Report back to employees to keep them informed on the status of their problem.
- Keep all members informed on union activities, priorities, programs, etc.
- File formal grievances when required.
- Introduce yourself to new employees and orient them to the union and the workplace.
- Mobilize the organized!

THINGS TO THINK ABOUT . . .

Problems and Challenges

Make a list of any problems and challenges you can identify in your own workplace. Problems are often related to one another. A single problem cannot be resolved apart from others. The following charts list some common problems with rank and file, with management, and with unions. The charts suggest possible causes and offer possible solutions. Compare your list of problems with these and see if the causes might correlate and the suggested solutions might be appropriate.

The Steward and the Rank and File

Problems	Possible Causes	Possible Solutions
Members bring far too many minor problems to the steward and expect them to be handled as legitimate grievances.	Steward doesn't know how to say "No" in a fair and convincing way by explaining why; doesn't know where to refer members for help.	Training will help steward learn to screen legitimate grievances from gripes, personal problems, etc.; develop confidence in judgment.
Members bypass the steward.	No respect for abilities of steward; accustomed to bypassing other stewards, dealing with supervisor directly.	Establish respect for abilities and fairness; gain knowledge of jobs and the contract.
Members won't complain or sign grievances; feel intimidated.	Lack of solidarity; feeling that union can't effectively represent and protect members.	Make effort to train leaders; develop membership education program.
Members expect the steward to take sides against another member in promotions, overtime, etc.	Misunderstanding of the purpose of the union and the role of the steward; previous stewards may have taken sides, played favorites.	Educate members; set examples of fairness and evenhanded treatment.
Members fail to give the steward full information on grievances.	Steward may not know how to identify needed information and interview to get it; may also be "quiet arrangements" steward is unaware of.	Training on grievance preparation and collecting facts.
Members deal with the steward as a friend; expect representation	Stewards are sometimes elected only for popularity and can't say "No."	Demonstrate through action ability to say "No." Fight for rights of all.

on that basis.

Members view stewards as just helping themselves.

May have been true in the past. Management may be dominating and/or manipulative.

Get small victories for everyone at first; work from there.

The Steward and Management

Problems	Possible Causes	Possible Solutions
Automatic "NO" on every grievance.	Management is used to getting away with it; why shouldn't they reject everything?	Request reasons; advance to next step; win some arbitration cases.
Management stalls on grievances.	Again, management is used to getting away with it; may be no clear policy.	Press for settlement; advance to next step; confer and bargain over need to follow procedure.
Management won't settle without a horse trade.	Management knows this keeps workers divided, compromises union.	Insist that each grievance must be settled on its own merits.
One hand of management works against the other.	May be attempt to confuse, but may be due to management disorganization and lack of clear policy.	Educate members; set examples of fairness and evenhanded treatment.
Management knocks out grievance on technicalities.	Poor grievance preparation; stewards not aware of rights and may let management get away with it.	Avoid loopholes; make technicalities work for the union; apply pressure elsewhere.
New steward is informed that grievance is no good because management had "an agreement" with predecessors.	Could be pure bluff or could be something to it.	Ask to see the "arrangement" in writing, signed by authorized representatives; check with chief steward or officers.

The Steward and the Union

Problems	Possible Causes	Possible Solutions
Union won't send stewards to training courses.	Poor treasury; perhaps leaders think it is money down the drain.	Demonstrate that you can apply what is learned to benefit the union.
Senior stewards and others let deadlines slip, "blow" grievances.	May be overloaded; may not be getting proper grievances or full information from stewards.	Remind chief stewards of deadlines; assist with properly researched and written grievances; keep grievants posted on progress.
Members take grievances directly to senior stewards and local officers.	May not be confident of steward's ability; a few officers may encourage bypassing.	Show members you can represent them effectively; educate them on the need for procedure; consult with officers when necessary.

Complaints that union arbitrated case for another member but won't take his/her case.	Member may or may not have weak case; may not understand everything involved in arbitration.	Explain decision on merits and point out that union can't arbitrate every grievance.
Officers too overloaded to attend to everything properly.	Grievances not being settled at lower steps, especially the first.	Take some of the load off the top leadership by mastering first-step settlement techniques.

A local steward is often a difficult role since it requires impartiality and professionalism.

Stewards must make every effort to avoid conflicts of interest or the appearance of a conflict of interest. Keeping members accurately and reliably informed is the key to keeping member's confidence. Credibility begins when members learn they can rely on stewards, trust stewards and that stewards are effective and impartial.

All effort should be made to avoid accepting any favors or the perception that favors are being granted. Something as simple as accepting a cup of coffee can be easily misinterpreted as can sitting in an air conditioned office for long periods of time with managers. Efforts should be made to avoid rank and file perception that a union steward is just getting out of doing work that everyone else does.

As a union representative, the first and primary duty is to be an employee advocate. Union representatives must actively avoid ever agreeing with a manager who is criticizing, intimidating, threatening, coercing or otherwise harassing a fellow employee. First and foremost, the union representative must be the employee's advocate and have the employee's trust. Siding with a manager publicly poisons a representatives trust and impartiality and effectively destroys any relationship with that employee and with other employees who observe or hear the exchange. Union stewards must make every effort to reinforce and support employees.

If a troubled employee needs intervention; a union steward must be very careful in issuing warnings, being blunt and/or reading an employee "the riot act". First of all, if a discussion aimed at intervention is necessary, it is extremely important that the discussion be absolutely private. Any such discussion must also be prefaced with the clear communication that you represent the employee; good, bad or indifferent. Avoid direct criticism if possible, but explain that as a troubled employee, management is focused on everything that happens and that it is very important that nothing should happen to make the situation worse; as an employee in difficulty it is like being on double secret probation where one incident, however, minor can set off a chain of events that could be difficult to deal with and very hard on the employee. For every escalating event, it makes potential defenses that much harder until options disappear and the outcome is likelier to be very unpleasant for the employee. Mention that especially when employees are extremely vulnerable, some managers will try to provoke an over-reaction especially if there are personality issues involved or a pattern of harassment.

When employees are extremely vulnerable and managers are intent on getting rid of the employee; over-reaction to some perceived provocation is something that needs to be avoided. Some managers will know how to provoke an overreaction to achieve their intended goal; they will know which buttons to push, how hard to push and how often; and they will push, over and over again. Explain to the troubled employee that their focus should not be on helping management by over-reacting to provocation. If everyone knows what triggers will result in a carrier over-reacting, it is more important than ever for a troubled carrier to recognize what management or any provocateur is doing to effectively short circuit the provocateur's "can't miss" agenda. Detail an effective strategy to counter the provocations by documenting everything and by employing strategies to defuse volatile situations.

Also it is important that as a steward, it is made clear that the Union will properly contest policies, directives and procedures that are in violation of the collective bargaining agreement. There is no reason why this has to be a contentious issue, since it is simply an administrative action that is available to employees, to unions and to stewards to resolve a potential disagreement on the interpretation or application of the collective bargaining agreement. If the disagreement is handled skillfully, managers will realize that it is not personal and may even pre-discuss potential issues before announcement to all employees.

Ideally, union and management will reach accommodations to discuss these issues before they can become contentious and if unable to reach an agreement, most stewards would love to be in a situation where a manager announcing a policy mentions that the implementation is in dispute with the union and until resolution of that dispute, the policy will be

If a manager does not do that, then it is incumbent on the union representative to let the employees know that the issue is in dispute, a grievance(s) has been filed or detail any other action taken.

Fairness and Impartiality

In nearly every unit there are personality clashes where people just simply do not get along at best and at worse, where people are able to become completely enraged at the idea that so ans so is happy, content, carefree or comfortable and not facing an ever lasting torment of all of the plagues of humanity every waking moment of every day. These situations are a particular challenge for stewards. How a steward represents someone they hate is the one benchmark that measures how good a steward is. If a steward can fairly represent someone they absolutely hate, then they are truly impartial.

This does not require superhuman effort. It simply requires the ability to compartmentalize and to be professional. Business is business and personal is personal and they should not be mixed.

The obverse is also difficult. How stewards represent friends is equally critical. True friends would not expect not seek extra attention or extra favor. But, and this is very critical for the perception of all the employees a steward represents, everyone must be represented equally. Favoritism destroys the trust employees have for their steward.

The idea that a steward can reward or punish employees is poisonous for the concept of unionism. The idea or even the perception that a steward does reward or punish employees, is a travesty for the legal and ethical responsibilities of the steward, the union, the bargaining unit, the employer and the entire collective bargaining system. When stewards act from personal animus or a personal agenda, the credibility of the union is completely wiped out in an instant and any trust that steward had is likely forever tarnished if not completely obliterated. It takes so long and is such a painstakingly meticulous process to build credibility and trust and it can ALL disappear in a flash instantaneously.

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