

Being a Good Steward (Part 4)

I was really going to save this part for part 6, but it is just too important to delay. This part I call the New Steward philosophy, but it is really just common sense. For some, however, it will prove very difficult to implement.

In most cases when a craft member contacts a steward, it is much more convenient at that time for the craft members since they know what they want to discuss, what they want done and have essentially allotted time to take care of it. For a steward, it is almost always an interruption, a diversion or comes at a time when you are trying to do something else.

It is simple human nature to try to dispatch whatever problem is presented as quickly as possible. Since, a potential grievant is also coming to you with the possibility of additional work, the procrastinating nature of people is to try and put off any additional work. It is human nature, but it is problematic for a good steward system.

The steward method of operations then becomes how can I best handle this situation with the minimum of bother, the minimum of work and the minimum of effort. Human nature encourages stewards to find a way not to file a grievance or to get involved as a steward.

In the back of the steward's mind is "how can I find a way to make this complaint disappear?" Oh good, the complaint is about another craft member and we can't file a grievance against another craft member. I'll just simply tell the grievant that there is no grievance and that'll be the end of it. Handled, taken care of and back to what I was doing.

As a consequence, most stewards approach a potential situation, issue or problem trying to figure out how to not do something about it. If it isn't an obvious grievance, case closed and that's the end of it.

It is a very poor way to handle grievance administration and serves to give license to the laziest and the most unsympathetic of stewards. It does not serve rural carriers very well and rewards unresponsiveness, arrogance and a sense of privilege.

A Better Approach to dealing with potential grievants

What would happen if, just a few subtle changes were made in how stewards related and responded to rural craft employees?

Suppose that stewards as a matter of course, responded to rural craft employees depending on what they were doing at the time with ten minutes (if they could not fully explore an issue, a situation or a problem in ten minutes, they make an appointment to complete the discussion and keep the appointment either by telephone or in person).

- That subtle little change gives the steward an opportunity to be prepared to take notes and to listen and carefully question a craft employee to flesh out a situation, an issue or a problem.

- It also demonstrates to the grievant that their concern is important enough that the steward is willing to listen and follow up.

- It also gives both steward and craft employee time to gain access to additional materials and to do a little background investigation.
- It establishes a bond and a trust between craft employee and steward.

The second important change and the most revolutionary is to completely change your whole approach as a steward when you are dealing with a craft employee. Instead of looking for an excuse not to have to do anything or to file a grievance; **SIMPLY LOOK FOR A GRIEVANCE(S) OR ISSUE THAT YOU CAN IMPACT THAT WILL MAKE THINGS BETTER.**

Very simple! Help the craft employee to look for a grievable issue or an issue that can be dealt with. If after all possible scenarios have been reviewed, there are simply no grievable issues, try to find a way to influence, impact or affect an improvement in a way that will cause the least amount of adverse impact.

Don't be the grand wizard of labor relations, the all seeing, all-knowing magician who performs astonishing feats of magic instantaneously when you are sufficiently moved to let lose the power of the forces of labor justice. Be the coach and the partner to work to resolve issues or to pro-actively affect positive change for potentially serious issues before they reach a stage of volatility.

For stewards, it will take some practice. But as a craft member approaches you or telephones you; keep in the back of your mind, how you can find a way to find a grievable issue that has merit or how you can find a way to respond to either the grievant's complaint or the central issue that affects the grievant's complaint.

For one thing, you will have to explore a lot of the peripheral issues involved on the complaint to determine what is the root cause or what is a contributing factor that may in fact be a grievable issue. You may have to determine whether or not the grievant is willing to be the pint person in disputing the issue or is it necessary to camouflage their identity by either a union initiated class action grievance or some other device that effectively prevents retribution on the complaining carrier.

As a steward, if you can radically change the way you approach each rural carrier craft employee, you may notice that you have gone a long way toward establishing credibility and trust. Every time you are approached as a steward, you are given an opportunity. If you can recognize it as an opportunity and treat it as an opportunity, you will be that much better as a representative.

Now, look at the down side. Suppose, that because a rural carrier craft employee tried to talk to you at the worst possible time or they were not really good in articulating the nature of their problem; so that you pretty much dismissed them. If they truly had a real serious issue; when the ramifications play out, the likelihood that you were approached as a steward is likely to also come to light. It can happen in a complaint made to a senior state official, a national officer, the Department of Labor, an attorney, Federal watchdog agencies including the National Labor Relations Board and a host of other venues.

If you failed to take the time to understand the issues involved, the result could be very unfortunate in terms of embarrassment, in terms of liability, in terms of sanctions, in terms of credibility and in terms of continuing as a union officer/steward. But must, much worse, is how the entire union is stained with failure, negligence and loss of trust. How do you face a carrier who had paid a heavy price for your error, your omission, your negligence, your arrogance, your lack of competency? How do you face his/her friends and acquaintances who all know the story?

Each time you talk to a rural carrier craft employee; you may face an opportunity. The only question is will you recognize the opportunity and rise to meet it?

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