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Talking vs. Communicating

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Talking vs. Communicating

There is a saying, "When all is said and done, more is said than done." Stewards who attend union meetings to decide how to handle an issue or grievance sessions with management probably agree. Why is it so difficult to get past the talk and make decisions, agreements and, well, get things done?

One reason is that when people talk to each other they often fly by like jets headed in different directions. Their arguments and the points they make don't connect, so they never get past just repeating them to each other or throwing up their hands in frustration.

Below are four examples of common ways people talk past each other, and what you can do about them to make your interactions more productive.

Impact vs. Intention

One person argues strongly that she was insulted by something you said. You insist with equal strength that you did not mean to cause offense. She is focusing on the impact of your remark and you are focusing on the intent of your remark.

The deadlock can be broken and a better discussion can follow if she says something like, "You may have meant well, but the effect of your remark was insulting" and/or if you say something like, "I didn't mean to insult you but I hear you telling me that you were offended by what I said."

This is not just good advice to improve communication: it's important because on issues like sexual harassment the courts look at the impact of statements regardless of the intentions of those who said them.

Either/Or vs. Yes/And

At a labor-management meeting, management says union members are taking outrageously long breaks. The union

responds that in fact supervisors are constantly pushing members to work through their breaks.

If both sides weren't stuck in an either/or argument (either members abuse breaks or supervisors abuse members) they might admit that *yes*, some members take their time getting back to work after coffee *and* some supervisors do deprive members of their rightful breaks. From there the two sides can move to getting more specific about how often each happens and then work on ways to reduce abuse surrounding breaks by supervisors or members as appropriate.

Process vs. Content

You have a great idea, but your fellow union members are angry. It's not that the idea isn't great, it's that you didn't consult anyone before you presented it to the group. You might get defensive because no one is giving credit for your hard work and good idea while the members are angry because you left them out of the process.

Things like this happen because you are so focused on coming up with a good idea you didn't remember that even the

greatest idea can get lots of opposition from people who believe they have a right to be in on the process of developing the idea from the beginning.

Concept vs. Specifics

A steward floats an idea at a meeting to plan a social event for members to build solidarity, and suggests perhaps a picnic. Instead of discussing whether having some kind of event is a good idea, some people start debating specifics, such as will the weather be good enough, or what should be on the menu. Other people stay out of the discussion or are negative on all specifics because they are not convinced a picnic is a good idea.

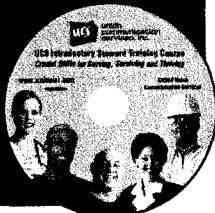
To get this discussion on track the group needs to first discuss and reach agreement on the concept of having a social function and what the goals of the event should be. Then they can have a good discussion on the specific details.



By being more aware of these dynamics and avoiding their pitfalls you should be able to find more common ground with people as you communicate. You may not always agree, but it will be much clearer that you disagree over real differences rather than on miscommunications, misunderstandings and missed opportunities.

— Ken Margolies. The writer is on the Labor Extension faculty of Cornell University.

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