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Creative Problem Solving

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A man goes to a psychiatrist and complains, "I can't sleep. When I'm in bed I worry that someone is under the bed. And when I sleep under the bed I worry that someone is *on* the bed." The psychiatrist responds, "I can help if you visit me twice a week for three years at \$150 per visit. Think about it and call me when you're ready."

Some time later the doctor sees the man on the street and says, "I never heard from you. Are you sleeping any better?" The man answers, "Yes. A bartender solved my problem. He told me to cut the legs off my bed."

Sometimes solutions to difficult problems are simple, if you think creatively. Here are three true stories of how stewards used their creativity to resolve workplace problems.

Put the Boss in Focus

A steward in a union representing camera operators for a TV station was defending a member who management said was doing below average work. The steward believed management just didn't like this one operator and that the cameraman's work was fine. Rather than keep arguing about it the steward had a better idea.

The steward was also a camera operator, and management liked her work. At the next football game the station was broadcasting, both the steward and the other operator were working different cameras. Every camera has a number, like one or two, and the director who is in a control box away from the camera operators gives orders like, "Camera two close up," "Camera one wide shot," and so forth.

Without telling the director, the two operators switched cameras. After the game, when the director again complained about the work, thinking it had been done by the operator he didn't like, the steward revealed the switch. Once exposed, the director sheepishly backed off and the problem was solved.

Make Management Go Goofy

A union was trying to solve health and safety problems for its members, who were required to wear heavy, hot costumes of cartoon characters at a popular

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amusement park. After much arguing with management about whether the workers were making a big deal over a minor discomfort, the union challenged a manager to spend a workday in costume, just like the members did.

It didn't take long before the manager conceded that modifications to the costumes were needed and the rules about breaks had to be liberalized.

Tie Them Up

In another example of creative problem solving, a steward who worked in a supermarket overturned a new, unpopular rule that male employees had to wear ties.

The steward did it by buying a cheap clip-on tie being sold at the store, being careful to select the ugliest, loudest one he could find. He wore it daily until it got worn and ragged, which didn't take long: it was a really cheap tie. Management was reluctant to criticize the tie once they realized he bought it from their own store.

Eventually, the frustrated store manager ordered the steward to take off the offensive tie. By then the other workers were starting to follow the steward's lead and management decided to drop the tie program altogether.

The moral of these stories is that a good steward has lots of tools to use when solving grievances and other workplace problems, not the least of which are good investigations, persuasive arguments, group support, work actions, and

knowledge of the contracts. But, as these true stories demonstrate, stewards can be even more effective when they add creativity to their toolboxes.

Come Up With Ideas

How do you come up with ideas like these? Here are some tips:

Look at how similar problems have been solved before. Talk to other stewards, senior members, union representatives, union officers. Look through books and other material. Look at the problem from every angle. List all the factors on a wall chart. Try putting things together that normally don't fit. Then, stop thinking about it, clear your mind, and expose yourself to new ideas.

Do things unrelated to the problem: read, go to a movie or a concert. Explore

new sources of information: read new magazines, talk to people from other jobs or industries. This exposure tends to "plant" ideas in your subconscious.

Now it's time to start thinking about the problem again.

Get a group together and brainstorm: list every idea anyone can think of — no censoring or evaluation until you have exhausted all ideas. List the ideas on a chart so everyone can see them.

Review each idea, listing the pros and cons. Try different combinations of ideas to create new ones. After evaluating all the ideas on your list, it's time to decide on two or three possible solutions.

Run your ideas by people who were not at the original brainstorming session. Get opinions from people not even involved in the problem. Do a final review of your preliminary solutions and make a decision on which one to execute.

Creatively solving your problem not only pleases members and builds the union, but makes your steward's job more interesting and enjoyable. And, like the man in the opening joke, it may help you sleep better, too.

Get a group together and brainstorm. You'll be surprised what you can come up with.