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Uniting a Divided Workforce

Ken Margolies
Cornell University, kam47@cornell.edu

Uniting a Divided Workforce

In some ways, a day on the job can be like an evening at home: you perform familiar rituals, handle chores, maintain relationships. . . and, on occasion, get into family squabbles. When those differences occur at home, it's often mom or dad who has the job of setting things right. At work, though, it's most likely to be you, the steward.

Keeping your co-workers united and focused on common goals, ready to respond and act as a solid force if confronted by a management threat to wages, benefits or conditions, is a big part of a steward's job — and one of the most difficult. Here are three big causes of disunity, and some tips on how to get members past them.

1 Rumors and misinformation
People being people, we tend to believe rumors and misinformation (often spread by management), especially when things aren't going well in the workplace. Imaginations can run wild, even more so when there's a lack of real information to counterbalance the nonsense that's going around. Some people are ready to believe the worst about each other and the union. That's why it's so important for stewards to keep members informed about what's really happening — or not — and to actively stop rumors.

It's tempting to get angry with members who believe rumors and “not dignify” the bad information by responding. Human nature being what it is, a lack of response is likely to convince people that the rumors must be true. A better approach is to investigate to find the truth, look for the source of the rumor, and provide members with the facts in a clear and positive way.

You can't spend all your time chasing down rumors, of course. Just do your best to keep members regularly informed on the big issues. When controversy arises,

provide accurate information as soon as possible — before the rumors start.

2 Decisions made in a vacuum?

For example, let's say management offers to let the union decide the fairest way to have people choose vacation dates. As steward, you come up with a bidding process that you think is best for the most people. You are then shocked when even some of the people who will benefit most from your decision are angry with you.

The problem here is that when people feel that a decision that affects them was made without their being consulted, they are likely to react negatively and perhaps start accusing each other or you of making a secret deal. You've even probably heard this at one time or another: “It's not the actual decision that bothers me, but how the decision was made.”

The plain truth is that members are more likely to support a decision that they participate in making, and when they understand how and why the decision was made.

3 Groups that don't see eye to eye

There's a big generation gap in a lot of workplaces today. Members with seniority say that younger workers don't understand or appreciate how hard it was to win the things the union fought for over many years. Younger workers, those who've been on the job for a lot less time than the more senior people, often feel that the union doesn't care about their issues. And, they say, their

older co-workers are too quick to lecture them.

Bridging this gap doesn't happen overnight, but there are things you can do to bring the generations together. The first step is to recruit help from at least one person from a generation other than your own. If you are one of the senior members, a younger person can help you learn about the concerns of the other generation. Perhaps they have an issue that the union is not addressing. Maybe they are turned off because at union social events, “their” music doesn't get played or they are tired of being “lectured” on how tough it was in the old days.

Once you better understand the younger members you can start finding ways to involve them more in union activities and start a dialogue that can lead to greater unity.

Focus on Common Issues

It's often the case that when members are not united, they're not thinking about how to solve common problems. The disunity can spring from rumors, from disputes over process, from bad feelings between age groups. . . and probably dozens of other causes as well. The bottom line is their differences keep workers from uniting to make their work lives

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better.

Stewards have to help members focus on their common issues. It takes a lot of communication, especially one-on-one discussions. Work with your members to close ranks and strengthen the union. Help them choose an issue — one that's winnable — that affects everyone. Together, plan actions that help solve the problem. Once members are involved in a common struggle they are more likely to become a strong, united group, more prepared to fight the big battles that almost always lurk just down the road.

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