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Cornell University ILR School

Year 2000

Representing Difficult People

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Representing Difficult People

Few stewards would argue that most of their union work flows directly from problems with management. Contract misinterpretations and outright violations, thoughtless supervision, paperwork foulups and a million other things go wrong all the time, adding up to a real handful for stewards.

That's why it can be such a frustration and disappointment when some of your most difficult problems come not from management, but from your own ranks.

If you've been a steward for any length of time, you've certainly dealt with difficult members. These can be people who constantly attack the steward and the union over one issue or another, or demand the impossible — and then get angry when the impossible can't be made to happen. And then there are those co-workers who are whiners — always complaining and nagging the steward for help, but never doing anything to help themselves.

The fact is, most of your co-workers are probably fine folks. It's just that occasional difficult person who might be making you wonder why you ever agreed to be a steward in the first place.

The question is, what can you do about it?

A good start would be to try to understand why members sometimes act in these difficult ways. You've seen them all, at one time or another:

- 1** Members with legitimate complaints about the union or steward;
- 2** Members who demand "service" in exchange for their dues, because they view the union like an insurance company or other service they buy;
- 3** Members who seem to cause difficulty in everything they do, perhaps for psychological reasons.

It can be tempting — and easy — to put people into category number 3. But

think long and hard before you do this. Listen to their complaints so you really understand where they're coming from. And keep in mind that you have a legal obligation, under your Duty of Fair Representation responsibilities, to do your best possible job on their behalf. Be really sure that there's nothing you can do about their complaints before you make the decision to reject them.

Whatever the cause for the anger, as a rule, when a co-worker is mad, you need to defuse the situation before you can get down to business. People who are angry usually just get more agitated if you tell them to "calm down" or if you respond with more anger. Instead, firmly say something like, "I see that you are really angry about this, I want to hear what you have to say, but I can't do that if you keep yelling."

If the member has a legitimate complaint, look for constructive ways they can help you solve their problem. If someone screwed up, acknowledge it and focus on what can be done now to make things better. Try to involve other members in the discussion and the solution if possible.

If members are in the "service model" mindset and are demanding their

"money's worth," you have an education job to do. Scolding or lectures about what a union is, and what is expected of union members, will probably just make the situation worse. Show members that they are the union by the way you do your job. Keep them informed about everything, talking to them one-on-one as necessary. Whenever there are problems in your workplace call members together to plan actions to get solutions.

And that co-worker who is definitely a Category Three type? Well, there's an old saying, "If you wrestle with a pig you both get dirty and the pig likes it." In other words, don't get sucked into this individual's personal problem. Don't argue or get into long discussions with him or her — it almost always gets you nowhere. Instead, make clear, firm statements that don't engage the complainer. Say things like, "I hear what you said, and I'm sorry you feel that way, but now I have work to do." You may even have to repeat it several times. Eventually the difficult person will see that they can't get you to "wrestle" with them and they will move on to something or someone else.

In all situations it's important that you have developed good relationships with the members you represent: your best resource in dealing with difficult members is almost always going to be your ability to draw on other members for help and understanding.

— Kenneth Margolies. The writer is on the labor extension faculty of Cornell University.

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