

ILR Collection
Articles & Chapters

Cornell University ILR School

Year 1997

Building Membership Participation

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Membership involvement is important to help fight for good contracts, organize new members and solve problems on the job.

But most workers aren't born union activists, and many don't think their participation makes much difference. To convince them to get involved we have to show them that their participation will be worthwhile — and maybe even enjoyable.

Here are some proven ways to build participation and strengthen the union.

FIND OUT WHAT MEMBERS WANT

Members are more likely to participate in the union when it's tackling an issue they care about. Come up with a list of workplace problems that really bug people. The issues can be small, like the condition of the restrooms or the way assignments are made.

TAKE ON A WINNABLE ISSUE

A winnable issue is something that has a reasonable solution that members believe is fair.

If you are working with a group that is not very involved in the union, don't start with a problem that requires a lot of money to fix or something that management has a longstanding commitment not to change.

DO A POWER ANALYSIS

Figure out who in management has the authority to solve the problem, then figure out how to influence them.

Do they like to stay low-key and avoid being noticed by upper management? Is it possible to embarrass them? Will a lot of grievances bother them?

When you're doing something that management wants you to stop doing, you'll have the power to get your problem solved.

BRAINSTORM IDEAS FOR ACTION

Once you've picked an issue, get a small group together and think of all the things you can do to pressure management to fix the problem.

List every idea — no matter how far-fetched — then discuss each of them. Rule out some, modify others, and keep talking until you come up with tactics you think will work.

PLAN YOUR STRATEGY

Start with the most reasonable and constructive tactics, like meeting with management or circulating a petition, and work your way up to more confrontational approaches as necessary.

Some examples of creative tactics that other workers have used successfully:

➤ To protest the firing of a flight attendant for borrowing a magazine from an airplane overnight, co-workers collected old magazines and presented them publicly to airline management.

➤ To confront a problem with a particular supervisor, workers wrote him a mock performance review and distributed it in the workplace.

➤ To fight a new policy that men wear ties, everyone came to work with the ugliest, most absurd ties they could find.

➤ To show management that workers were serious about refusing a change in shift assignment, members wore buttons that said simply, "No!"

BUILD MEMBERSHIP SUPPORT

Start with the people who are the hottest about the issue you've chosen. Then ask them to help reach out to others, and so on, until as many workers as possible are involved.

KEEP MEMBERS TOGETHER

To keep members united, you'll have to communicate with them every day. Make sure everyone understands the union's tactics and is prepared for the ways management might respond.

Think ahead. Be ready with at least one more tactic. Often, the key to victory is showing management that you won't give up. Once the boss sees that you're serious, management may decide that it's easier to agree to a reasonable solution than to keep resisting.

CELEBRATE AND LEARN FROM VICTORIES

When you're able to solve a problem on the job, call everyone together to talk about how things are better as a result of members getting involved and taking action.

Review your tactics so you can build on your success — and learn from your mistakes.

Thank everyone who participated. Maybe you can distribute a leaflet claiming victory or get some recognition at a union meeting or in the union newsletter.

Even if you're not able to claim victory, applaud the fact that members took action and stuck together, and point out that it will take more membership involvement to win next time.

— Ken Margolies. The author is Education Director for the International Brotherhood of Teamsters. Adapted from *The Teamster Leader*.

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