

# IMPACT BRIEF

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## Union Leaders' Actions Can Rev Up the Rank and File

**Research question:** How can local union presidents influence members' beliefs about, and involvement with, the union?

**Conclusion:** Local union leaders engage in activities that concern internal affairs and others that pertain to external matters. These internal and external orientations are elements of leadership that affect how members feel about and perceive their union, which in turn affect their allegiance and commitment to the union. Specifically, beliefs about how well the union delivers on wages, benefits, and working conditions (instrumentality) and perceptions of wage equity and the degree of rank-and-file voice in decisions (distributive and procedural justice, respectively) at least partially mediate the link between local leaders' actions and members' loyalty to, and willingness to work for, the union.

**Workplace impact:** Winning the hearts, minds, and hands of union members means local union presidents must consistently attend to both internal and external matters. Policies and actions that secure outcomes the members' value, and practices that encourage and respect members' ideas and opinions, should be visible and transparent. In other words, union leaders should send a strong "union utility" message if their goal is to build and maintain an effective union local.

**Abstract:** Researchers have long concluded that work-

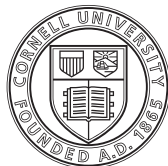
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ers' thoughts and feelings about both union and employer influence their commitment to, and participation in, the union. Few studies, however, have focused on the individuals within the union whose actions help shape the attitudes and perceptions that affect member involvement. These individuals, the union presidents, are charged with securing the conditions—at the bargaining table, in contract implementation, in labor-management relations, and in contacts outside the workplace—that underlie workers' perceptions and beliefs. This study takes the novel tack of exploring the pathways through which local union leadership affects rank-and-file commitment and involvement.

Local union presidents play a multifaceted role. Internally, they focus on informing and educating the rank and file about union activities and objectives; they negotiate and enforce the labor contract and resolve conflicts; and they consult with and include members in aspects of administration. External initiatives are less readily observed by the rank and file but nonetheless weigh heavily on the union's overall effectiveness; these outward-focused activities include building coalitions with other unions and community groups and working with state- and national-level union staff. Both sets of leadership activities result in two categories of outcomes: instrumental (concrete gains—or losses—for members) and justice (voice, wage equity, and fair procedures). It is these outcomes, the authors argue, that affect the local's utility to its members.

For the hypotheses tested here, the researchers obtained data from a large teachers' union in a northeastern



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state. Assessments of local leaders' internal and external effectiveness came through surveys of teacher-members and the union's field staff. Members were also asked about loyalty to, willingness to work for, and actual participation in, the union. Background data (e.g., school district wealth, union local demographics) were pulled from archival materials. With the data in hand, the researchers first sought to establish whether the time and effort local leaders spend on internally- and externally-focused activities are positively related to members' beliefs and perceptions about union instrumentality and justice. They then asked whether these convictions and attitudes mediate the path from local leader behaviors to member commitment and loyalty.

The findings are both subtle and informative. To begin, analysis of the data affirmed that internally- and externally-focused leadership behaviors were related but conceptually distinct. Wages proved to be positively associated with members' perceptions of the union's effectiveness at the bargaining table, and beliefs about instrumentality and perceptions of justice were related to each other and to union loyalty. Union participation was positively correlated with union commitment, particularly in the realm of members' willingness to work for the union.

As expected, the researchers found that both sets of leadership activities were positively associated with members' perceptions of, and beliefs about, the union. The more time and effort local presidents expended on wage and non-wage issues, the stronger was members' perception that the union played a key role in winning valued outcomes. Likewise, the more time and effort local presidents spent on communicating with and cultivating member input, the more members felt a sense of procedural justice. Leaders' external activities, on the other hand, were only weakly associated with perceptions of union instrumentality. Still, there was a slightly stronger association between external leadership and members' perceptions of distributive justice (i.e., equity in wages).

Further analysis of the data showed that perceptions of union effectiveness, fair procedures, and wage equity help explain how local leadership influences rank-and-file commitment to the union. Perceptions of union instrumentality and procedural justice partially mediated the pathway from internal leadership to loyalty and willingness to work for the union; these perceptions did not, however, mediate between leaders' internally-focused activities and members' responsibility to, and participation in, union affairs. The relationship between external leadership and loyalty to the union is also affected by rank-and-file beliefs about wage and non-wage outcomes and by perceptions of procedural justice; the mediating effect of wage equity, on the other hand, is negative.

Finally, the researchers found variation among union locals in members' perceptions of instrumentality and justice, and in commitment and participation. These differences can be attributed to the local presidents; that is, to the quality and quantity of internally- and externally-focused leadership. It is the visibility and direct impact of internal leadership, however, that explains most of the inter-union variance.

**Methodology:** The researchers obtained data on 326 local union presidents from 4,363 teachers and 51 field staff. They built a seven-factor model with control variables and used multiple steps to test the hypotheses.

**Source document:** "Union Leadership and Member Attitudes: A Multi-Level Analysis" is forthcoming in *Journal of Applied Psychology*.

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