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Robo the Steward

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Robo the Steward

Abstract

[Excerpt] Some years ago a science fiction movie featured Robocop, the perfect police officer. He had super-human abilities and a set of prime directives to govern his approach to the job. It got me thinking: What if there was a Robosteward? What abilities do you think he or she (or it?) should have? Here are some possibilities

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Comments

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Robo the Steward

Some years ago a science fiction movie featured Robocop, the perfect police officer. He had super-human abilities and a set of prime directives to govern his approach to his job. It got me thinking: What if there was a Robosteward? What abilities do you think he or she (or it?) should have? Here are some possibilities.

1. Manage information and time effectively

Robosteward would have a dispenser for important brochures and information about the union, benefits and the contract. That way whenever members needed one of these documents they could help themselves.

Robo has all-important phone numbers and e-mail addresses handy. He never has to waste time searching for members' phone numbers or addresses.

Each morning Robo generates a to-do list based on the goals and directives he has set previously, and the items on the list are prioritized.

Robo has a gauge that constantly compares what he is doing to the priorities on the to-do list. A red light flashes whenever Robo spends more than a few minutes on something other than the top priorities until they are taken care of.

Robo automatically takes notes on important encounters: discussions with members, meetings with management, etc. In the case of discussions with management, Robo generates a confirming letter, with specific details and dates, whenever management makes a commitment or an agreement.

2. Build strong relationships with members and others

Robo has keen listening and comprehension abilities to hear what members and others say. Robo paraphrases — repeats back to the member — what was said so members know they were heard correctly. A gauge on Robo regulates his listen-

ing to speaking ratio so that Robo always listens about twice as much as he talks.

When Robo does speak, his message is clear and understandable. Robo has sensors to help determine if the message has been understood. If the sensors are inconclusive Robo is programmed to ask his listener a question to find out if the communication was effective.

Whenever Robo chairs a meeting the meeting starts and ends on time.

Robosteward's Prime Directives

Basic principles that govern how an effective steward operates:

1. Build the union. Don't see your job as waiting for people to come to you with problems. Do things to create a unified group of workers with the power to prevent problems as well as solve them when they arise.

2. Always say and think "we," not "I." As in, what are "we" going to do about it. Involve members in all aspects of the union's activities. Don't let yourself become the "fixer" whom everyone expects to do everything.

3. Be a leader, set an example, stand up. Set activity in motion, delegate and see that things get done. Show how to be a good union member and have the courage to take a stand and show others that they can make a difference and don't have to be afraid.

Members get adequate notice of the hour, place and agenda for the meeting. Robo personally invites as many members as possible. He keeps the meeting on the agenda, but doesn't do that much talking. Instead, Robo asks others to report, facilitates discussions, clarifies issues, provides necessary information — and if the meeting is to make a decision, ensures that the decision is made fairly. Before the meeting comes to a close Robo summarizes what was accomplished and any assignments or follow-up that people agreed to take on.

Robo's memory is designed to always follow up on commitments Robo makes.

That way members know they can depend on him. His memory is also filled with information about each member that Robo has gathered from listening to the members. Robo then knows what issues are important to the members, who is friends with whom, what talents members have that Robo can draw on to help build the union, and what level of union support each member has demonstrated in the past so Robo can build on it step by step.

3. Employ a highly developed strategic mind

In all situations Robo analyzes all the relevant facts before making any action plans. Besides determining what happened and why, Robo talks to members individually and in groups to assess how the situation affects the workers and the union and what solutions the union should seek.

Besides being strategic in dealing with individual situations, Robo is programmed to look at the larger picture. The first part of that is looking at Robo's area of responsibility and doing an analysis of the current situation as compared to what the members want. Then, along with the members, Robo leads a process of coming up with goals for improving things and plans for reaching those goals.

Before taking any action Robo is programmed to identify and evaluate at least three ways to solve the problem. Part of his strategic program is a function that remembers how past situations were handled. This way Robo can factor in what worked and what didn't in the past. Part of the program is a variety of tactics along with criteria for judging which ones are appropriate for each situation.

Well, Robocop wasn't real and neither is Robosteward. But the truth is that human stewards, people who think and feel and work together, can learn and do everything a lot better than any robot.

Besides, who wants a steward that attracts refrigerator magnets?

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