Making Your Goals Clear

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Abstract
[Excerpt] Lack of definition can make people confused, agitated and sometimes even hostile. These disastrous consequences are avoidable. Here are some examples that show how lack of definition can get in a steward’s way — and what can be done about it.

Keywords
arbitration, negotiation, goals, stewards, avoiding misunderstand, avoiding confusion

Disciplines
Human Resources Management | Labor Relations | Organizational Behavior and Theory

Comments
Suggested Citation
Margolies, K. (2004). Making your goals clear [Electronic version]. Steward Update, 15(5). Retrieved [insert date], from Cornell University, School of Industrial and Labor Relations site:
http://digitalcommons.ilr.cornell.edu/articles/237/

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Making Your Goals Clear

W e have all been at bad meet­
ings: they start late, no one is
sure when they’re suppose to
end, some people are raising their hands
to speak, others are just speaking out,
there is no written agenda or time limit,
and usually not much gets done. People
leave frustrated.

One big reason meetings like this
happen is that too little attention is paid
to something called “definition” — an
understanding by all involved of what’s
being talked about or done, and why.

Without definition, most of the
things a steward does can fail as miser­
ably as the meeting described above. You
say “oranges” but others hear “apples.”
Not only aren’t the people you represent
on the “same page” as you, some aren’t
in the same book. At grievance meetings
with management it’s as if you’re broad­
casting on the FM band, and they are
receiving only on AM.

Lack of definition can make people
confused, agitated and sometimes even
hostile. These disastrous consequences
are avoidable. Here are some examples
that show how lack of definition can get
in a steward’s way — and what can be
done about it.

1 A steward asks three members who
are unhappy with management’s new
attendance policy to get together and talk
about it after work. The meeting starts
off with a lot of energy but people leave
frustrated and annoyed over “spinning
our wheels” and all the “loose ends.”

What happened? At least two very
important things were left undefined in
the steward’s outreach: the purpose of
the meeting and how long it would last.

The steward thought the meeting
was to find out how the policy was being
implemented — that is, for fact finding.
One member, though, thought it was to
vent about the unfair policy and the idiots
in management. Another member
thought it was about planning a job action.
Yet a third member kept insisting he want­
ed to hear what the lawyers had to say.
The result: the discussion bounced around
like a pinball from one topic to the other.

Making it worse, the steward thought
they had an hour to meet, but two of
the members got up suddenly after 45 minutes
saying they had to get to a softball game.

If the steward had defined with
everyone at the beginning of the meeting
— or, better still, before the meeting — the
exact purpose of the meeting and how
long it would last, they would have had a
better session. With at least two more
things defined at the end of the meeting
— what they accomplished or decided
and where they would go from here —
they would not have been so frustrated
and they would have left the meeting
much more ready to take the next steps.

2 Another steward had a grievance
meeting with a member and manage­
ment over discipline. It went badly.
Management kept talking directly to the
member trying to get a confession or
make a deal, and the member first started
yelling and then let management know
he was interested in the deal.

The problem? Lack of definition.
The steward didn’t clearly define the
roles the member and the steward would
play and what to do if management acted
badly or made an offer. The steward also
didn’t define for management some
ground rules for the meeting, including
that management should deal directly
with the steward as the member’s union
representative — not the member.

Again, a little definition would have gone
a long way.

3 Another steward, having just come
back from internal organizing train­
ing, was eager to get members more
active in the union. One by one the
steward approached members to find out
what was on their minds. One by one the
members gave the steward a list of things
the steward could fix for them. Oops —
more definition needed. The members
had one definition of a union: “member
complains, steward fixes things.” The
steward and the union need to convince
members that the definition of a union is
“we identify issues together and WE
work together to solve them.”

As you go through your steward and
other activities, interacting with others,
notice how things go. When they are not
going so well (people are not listening
to each other, nothing is getting done, peo­
ple are “jumping down each other’s
throats,” and so on) see if you can identi­
fy something important that has been left
undefined by the group. Then see if you
can improve the situation by suggesting a
clarification of one or more of the factors
causing the problems. You’ll start to
agree that “definition” can make a big
difference.

— Ken Margolies. The writer is on the labor education faculty
at Cornell University.

What Needs to be Defined

Following are examples of areas that need
to be defined. You’ll no doubt encounter
more in your work as a steward.

- Agendas (What are we here for? In
what order will the items be discussed?
What action, if any, are we taking on each
item?)

- Time limits (starting and ending
times, how long each can speak, how much
time will be spent on a particular subject)

- Roles (Are people there to only listen,
or to participate? Who chairs? Who
speaks? Who votes?)

- Rules (how to get recognized to
speak, no yelling, don’t repeat yourself,
stay on the topic)

- Issues (Exactly what are we talking
about? What do we want to do with the
issue? What are the various positions peo­
ple hold on the issue?)

- What was accomplished and next steps
(What did we decide or do? What are the
loose ends? Who will do what? By when?)