

The Roles Of The Steward

AFSCME members bring different skills, abilities, strengths and experiences to the job of union steward. Some are terrific organizers while other are great at motivating people. Some enjoy representing members in the grievance procedure and others eagerly tackle on-the-job issues by developing new tactics and strategies. With their energy, enthusiasm and commitment, AFSCME stewards play a key role in creating a vigorous local union.

The Steward As Leader

AFSCME members look to the steward as a leader in the workplace. They turn to the steward when they are seeking information or when they need some help in solving a problem. To be a leader, the steward must understand the diversity of the union's membership -- cultural, racial, gender differences -- and promote unity and solidarity to confront management's attempts to divide workers.

As a steward, you must have credibility (defined simply as being "worthy of belief or trust") with union members, co-workers, and with the managers and supervisors with whom you attempt to address workers' concerns and problems. Usually, credibility isn't granted - it must be earned over time.

You must be able **to** listen to the problems, concerns and issues of members and co-workers. Listening is a skill that must be learned and practiced.

Stewards must be able **to** motivate members to take action to address concerns and solve problems. Stewards who try to "do it all" become over-burdened, overwhelmed and stressed out. Stewards who "do it all" are not involving other members in the union. A local union's strength is directly related to the amount and kinds of activities in which union members are involved.

The Steward as Organizer

Reach Out to New Employees. In almost every instance, the first union leader a new employee sees is the steward. Right away you have a golden opportunity to "organize" the new worker -- that is, have the employee sign a membership card and join the union. Place a high priority on signing up new members, whether the employee is new on the job, or the worker has been around for years but -- for whatever reason -- hasn't joined the

union. In surveys, the Number One reason workers give for not joining a union is: "No one ever asked me." That problem is easy to fix -- go out and ask co-workers to join our union.

Don't Forget Agency Fee (Fair Share) Payers. In many places the union has negotiated a contract provision that workers who don't join the union are still required to pay an agency fee (Usually a percentage of or equivalent to union dues).

When it comes to organizing, don't forget these people or take the attitude of "well, we're getting money so it doesn't matter if they become members." Every worker in the BARGINING UNIT is a potential member, a potential resource, a potential talent, and a potential activist within the union.

The Steward as Communicator

The steward is the hub of a communications wheel. Information is constantly transmitting back and forth along the spokes of this wheel.

A strong union depends on this information flow. Union officers, stewards and members are always making decisions on how to address problems and on actions needed to create a better workplace. The greater the quantity and quality of this flow of information, the better those decisions will be.

The Steward As Representative

The steward represents employees in the grievance procedure. In addition, there are times when you become a representative, including:

- * In informal problem-solving efforts and discussions with management.
- * In interactions with local officers, giving voice to employee views and concerns.
- * On the flip side, the steward represents local leaders when he/she passes on to members union-related information and objectives.

The Steward as Educator

Being a union educator is an ongoing task. You should know your contract or work rules, issues affecting members, and all about the union. But having a head full of information is only the first step. Just as important is your ability to share knowledge and information

in a way that helps workers understand how and why issues affect them. Informed and educated members become active members.

The Steward as Problem Solver and Union Builder

Different problems arise on the job almost every day. The supervisor is doing this, or not doing that. Co-workers are doing this, or not doing that. The administrator is not doing what they promised or the administrator is doing exactly what he promised not to do. To address most workplace problems, there are usually several approaches and options available.

The Grievance Procedure is the formal problem-solving process found in the contract or work rules if there is no contract. It has precise steps for stewards and managers to follow.

Yet, the grievance procedure has drawbacks: First, many problems are not covered by contract language. Second, it takes time to process a grievance through the steps of the procedure, bring to mind the old phrase, "justice delayed is justice denied ". Third, a grievance often involves only one steward and one worker. Therefore management is only confronted with one steward and one worker and where do unions find their strength? In numbers! So, always think about how you can involve members to address on-the-job problems.

Informal discussions with management can often successfully resolve workplace problems. The workers' representative - Steward - could do this. Better yet, a group of workers - with their steward - could meet with the manager. Strength in numbers! This could be done *before* filing a grievance (when there may be a better chance to solve the problem). Or, it could be done *instead of* filing a grievance.

Finally, as a steward you should not be afraid to get creative and look for Action Oriented Solutions for workplace issues and problems. Meet with employees and brainstorm ideas. Actions can be simple or elaborate. Everything from petitions to button days to leaflets to informational picketing. It depends on the issue as well as the solidarity and the energy of the group - and you can cultivate these over time.