

INVESTIGATING GRIEVANCES



A member — or members — come to you. They're mad. Really mad. "It's unfair...it's a violation of the contract...it's illegal...and it's not right!" You think to yourself, "yeah, this is terrible. I'd better do something." But what do you do next?

If your answer is "demand an explanation from management," you may want to think again. Sure, some problems are obvious grievances, but most of the time you'll need to know a lot more about what's going on. Jumping to conclusions based on false, faulty, or inadequate information will only undermine your credibility—and the union's.

AN EFFECTIVE INTERVIEW

Remember, a member who's upset, angry, and frustrated may not always give you an accurate picture of what happened. A disgruntled member may sometimes exaggerate and leave out important details. It's up to you to investigate, look at the facts, and then decide on a strategy for dealing with the problem. The first step in your investigation is to conduct effective interviews.

Get the information you need from an upset member after they've calmed down, either by taking them aside and talking for awhile, or by meeting with them later. Here are some time-tested tips for getting the most information.

- Make sure *you're* relaxed—and take your time. *Listening* is the key, so control your feelings and concentrate on hearing what the member says. Write down important facts, including who, what, when, where, how, why, and the names of any witnesses.
- Encourage the member to "get it all out" (both facts and feelings).
- Ask questions that can't be answered yes-or-no when you don't understand something or when you need to clear something up, such as: "Why do you think this happened?" Or, "Give me an example."

- Once in awhile, repeat back to the worker what you've heard them say. This checks your accuracy and often brings out overlooked facts.
- Avoid making judgments during the interview. Form your opinion later, after you've gathered the facts.
- Avoid making promises about the actions you will take. Assure the worker that you will investigate and let them know when you'll get back to them.
- If you don't know the answer to a question, don't guess. Promise the member you'll find out and get back to them (and do it!).

A FULL INVESTIGATION

Interview everyone connected to the problem in the same manner. Talk to other workers, any witnesses, other stewards, even foremen and supervisors. Never depend on a single version of what happened, if you can avoid it. And remember, interviews are one way of getting at the facts, but they're not the only way.

Check documents and records that could help you decide what happened and what should be done. They include:

- Past grievances, steward's notes, and arbitration decisions;
- The contract and supplemental agreements;
- Employer policies and work rules;
- Information that you may need from the boss.

When you've gathered all the facts, then it's time to put your case together (if there is one), and determine what strategy (big plan) and tactics (smaller moves) that can be used to solve it.

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