

TWU TIP: RESOLVE ISSUES EARLY

Here is the problem today for a local union steward. A member comes to you and asks you why her grievance has not been resolved. "It amounts to a few hours overtime," she tells you. "Why does it take four months to get paid?" Good question, you say to yourself. Why must it take so long?

An experienced steward understands the grievance process and his/her key role in making the procedure work. It begins and hopefully ends with the steward and member. No step two or three. No arbitration.

This might sound like heresy but it is common sense. Few grievances should ever go up the grievance ladder and even fewer should go to arbitration. When a large number of grievances go up

the grievance ladder, there is a serious problem with the procedure and its use. And that often signals a poor relationship between the employer and the local union.

WHY SHOULD ISSUES BE RESOLVED EARLY?

1. Members see results quickly. Minor issues should be tackled and resolved immediately. This shows the member that the union can deliver. Needless delay over a resolvable issue demonstrates weakness not strength.

2. Justice delayed is justice denied. This is an old saying that rings true today. How does it look to a member when a resolvable issue has to be processed in a way that takes months?

3. Resolving issues at an early stage builds up a relationship with your counterpart in supervision. It means that the issue doesn't go downtown or off the property and that makes the supervisor look good. This can also serve as the confidence building process that allows for other issues to be tackled.

4. Reducing the issue to a written grievance often forces both sides to posture and become inflexible.

5. Issues that could be handled by discussion can become costly grievances.

This does not mean we shouldn't file grievances. On the contrary, we should treat every grievable issue as if it will go to arbitration. Stewards should perform a thorough investigation and advocate in the strongest possible terms if a written grievance is merited and a step one meeting is necessary.

Let's also go through a reality check here. Your intentions may be the best but the road to hell is paved with the best of intentions. Why can't you get first step resolution? Here are a couple of reasons:

- Supervisors may not see early issue resolution as in their best interest. They might view sitting down with you to discuss issues as ceding over some of the little power that they have.

- They may not know how to resolve the issue because they don't understand the agreement. The reasons are usually twofold: They do not come out of the bargaining unit so they don't really understand the connection between the contract and the work process. Or, they haven't been trained by the employer.

- They may also not be in the position to resolve issues informally. Usually, these are the same supervisors who must call Labor Relations to get an answer on your first step grievance.

- And then there are supervisors who are hostile to any kind of reasonable request.

But there is still a strong case for an informal discussion with management on workplace issues.

Where they can feel comfortable, stewards should take advantage of "open door" policies to meet and discuss issues with supervisors. Unless local union policy dictates otherwise, there is no reason why a steward cannot schedule a pre-grievance meeting with his/her counterpart in management.

We already do some of this "meet and discuss" when we go into the supervisors' office over the nonpayment of overtime or problems with work scheduling. A few TWU locals have integrated a pre-grievance meeting prior to step one. If the two sides cannot resolve the issue, it is then reduced to a written grievance and presented at a step one meeting. Some of our airline locals call efficiency meeting or round tables that are more formalized meetings with longer agendas. But they serve the same purpose as first level pre-grievance discussions.

TWU HISTORY



Seventy years ago, TWU Local 234 was chartered in Philadelphia to represent all employees of the Philadelphia Transportation Company. During that 1944 organizing drive, the TWU demanded the company promote African-American workers to operator titles from dead-end porter jobs. TWU won the union election that year but the defeated company union along with the employer, promoted a wildcat strike. U.S. President Franklin D. Roosevelt sent in troops to protect TWU workers who operated the transit system and the promotion of African-Americans to trolley operator titles went forward.

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Our Union's Front Line Soldiers

