

Prevail Through Persistence



Grievance handling is a little like filing a lawsuit. There are procedures, paperwork, and all-too-often-delays.

Ever since the labor movement gave up the right to strike over most grievances, we have relied more and more on the grievance and arbitration procedure to resolve issues. Grievances can be resolved informally, if you have the right relationship with your supervisor. But if you and your local officers use the formal grievance procedure to handle most grievable issues—and most of us do—we need to talk about the problems that it presents and how to overcome them.

No early resolution

One of the most common problems that stewards face is that they can't get resolution of simple issues at step one of the process. A supervisor may let the grievance sit in a pile of papers until the time limit on appealing to the next step has expired. Or a supervisor may flat out reject the grievance without proper consideration. Some new stewards find they can't even get through the door because the supervisor won't recognize their status as a union representative. Even if they can get through the door they are treated in a demeaning and unprofessional manner.

Each one of these issues demands a specific steward strategy and some of

them have been covered in earlier articles on the TWU website. What needs to be emphasized here is that you must keep at it. The process should be designed to get justice for the member. But the employer can abuse it to wear you down. And that can also happen at step 2 or step 3 of the procedure. Union presidents can find themselves as frustrated with the system as the shop steward.

Your goal is to demonstrate that the union won't accept the abuse of the system by a supervisor, manager, or the head of labor relations. That means you must persist and not get discouraged. You can get angry but stay professional and don't lose your cool or control of the situation.

Managing your manager

Peter Drucker, the management guru who is quoted by human resources people all the time, once said that managers need to learn how to manage their own bosses. I would add so do stewards. Your goal should be to teach them they can get more done by cooperating with you than by combating you. That's a tall order so you need to map out a simple strategy. Come to meetings prepared. Document the discussion of the meeting. Take a second steward with you if you need support. Exercise your rights as a union representative by not backing down but

also by acting professionally. If you can't resolve the problem there, be prepared to take it to the next step.

The local needs to be on the same page. It must act similarly at all steps of the process. If there are problems with a supervisor or manager, then the local needs to straighten the problem and the supervisor out. Usually this means going to their boss and up the chain of command until the organizational issue gets resolved so the day-to-day problems can also get resolved.

The employer can also throw a roadblock in front of your grievance investigation by never releasing you to conduct the investigation. You go to human resources to look at some personnel files and you are told you can't see them or can't take notes. You must document the denials and the delays and keep moving forward.

Union power

By prevailing through persistence, you are also exercising union power. By sharing some of the grievance resolution with the union, the employer is also ceding some power and that can be troubling to an employer who doesn't understand it is in their best interest to do so. It's better for their workforce and better for their bottom line. Complicated? Yes. Doable? Possibly. When locals succeed by persisting, some of these basic problems begin to get successfully resolved down at the lowest steps of the grievance procedure, where they should be resolved in the first place. And if they don't, the local can use the membership more effectively by organizing around grievances. That strategy will be covered in a future article.

TWU History

Seventy years ago on September 30, 1946, TWU Local 514 was chartered in Tulsa, Oklahoma. Over 4,000 TWU members work at the largest commercial airline maintenance facility in the world for American Airlines. Right: Members demonstrate at Tulsa Airport over American's attempt to layoff mechanics in 1954.



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