

Controlling the Grievance Meeting

We spend much of our time preparing for a grievance meeting and that is a very important part of the steward's job. We want to make sure that when we meet with management we are prepared. But do we ever consider the dynamics of the meeting itself? Do we simply walk into the meeting and accept the actual structure of the meeting?

Think back to the last time you discussed a grievance. The supervisor asked you to come in a half hour before your shift ended. You met in her office and parked yourself down in the only chairs available—those same hard chairs you used to have in the union hall. When you got there, she began by talking about her new car or your kids, takes a phone call and by the time you got down to business, there was only 15 minutes left before your shift was over. What's wrong with this picture? Plenty.

You might think this is what happens because it has always been that way, ever since you walked into management with the former steward. It doesn't have to be this way. In fact, the boss may very well be manipulating the situation to put himself at an advantage.

In a grievance discussion where you are

the union representative, the law terms you the equal of management. Called the "equity principle," this is a recognized principle of labor relations that has been upheld by labor arbitrations, board decisions, and the Supreme Court.

So let's go back to the scenario and see how we can shift the dynamics a bit. Agree on a time or suggest ones that are more convenient to you. The schedule is open to both parties. Think about where the meeting is held. The boss's office is the one that demonstrates his or her power. It can be intimidating at worst. Suggest a neutral area such as a conference room. Surely the seating arrangement in a conference room is more attuned to "equality." You can sit opposite each other. If you find yourself in an uncomfortable chair in the boss's office, ask for a different one or stand up. Never allow yourself to sit physically lower than the boss or at a lower eye level.

Do not let yourself get sidetracked by small talk. It's OK to chat for a few minutes about the weather or baseball but this talk should not be allowed to eat up valuable



discussion time. Keep it short and get right back to the matter at hand.

The other great time waster is the interrupting phone call. Your cell should be on vibrate but the boss should not be answering calls throughout the meeting. It is rude and it interrupts the flow of the discussion. That might even be the intent of the supervisor, but it should not be allowed to persist. One call is the signal to ask if further calls can be held until the end of the meeting. It is common courtesy.

Think of it this way. If the boss were meeting with one of his or her counterparts in the company, would he or she treat them in the same way as you are being treated? That should be the yardstick and a gentle but firm reminder may be in order.

There is no rule that says a meeting has to be held in a certain way other than within certain time frames. Unless your contract dictates how a meeting should run, your position should always be that as an equal of management in grievance resolution, you want to insure that the meeting is fair and resolves the issue, if possible. By asserting yourself you are beginning to wrest control of the grievance process from the hands of management and forcing the boss to take you seriously.

TWU History

Ramp operating and provisioning agents who had formed an in-house union (ROPA) in 1990 approached TWU in 1996 with the intent to affiliate.

The group became Local 555 and today it totals over 12,000 members with one of the strongest contracts in the industry.



The TWU Steward is published six times a year by Union Communication Services (UCS)—The Worker Institute at Cornell ILR in cooperation with the Transport Workers Union of America, AFL-CIO (TWU), 501 3rd St., NW, 9th Floor, Washington, DC 20001, www.TWU.org. For information on obtaining additional copies, please call (202) 719-3900. Contents, with the exception of "TWU TOOLBOX," copyright ©2017 by UCS—The Worker Institute at Cornell ILR. Reproduction outside TWU in whole or in part, electronically, by photocopy or any other means without written consent of UCS is prohibited. David Prosten, founder; Linda Donahue and Dania Rajendra, co-editors.