

Assertive Grievance Presentation

One of the most frustrating experiences you can have as a steward is to meet with management over a good grievance, even a very strong grievance, something really important to the members — yet management barely listens, let alone settles.

The reason may be management's hard-headedness. They may think by stonewalling on every grievance they can make them go away, or even undermine the members' support for the union. Maybe they don't feel any heat from the members, so they figure they don't have to be reasonable.

But maybe the problem isn't any of the above. Just maybe the problem is the way you present your case.

Stewards who find they are getting nowhere with management on grievances might benefit from standing back a few feet and looking at the way they approach the process of actually presenting the grievance. Because having truth and justice and right and virtue and the facts on your side sometimes may not be enough, if your presentation needs work.

Examine your tactics

What can add up to "needs work"?

■ You present a grievance so aggressively that your management counterpart reacts to your tone, not your content. Your management counterpart is so irritated or defensive at your approach that all he can focus on is giving you a big fat "No!" as a payback.

■ On the other hand, you can present a grievance too passively. You can be so calm, so even-toned and mellow and eager to keep things peaceful that you end up being unclear about what hap-

pened and what you want — and if management doesn't know what the union wants, there's no way the union can get it.

At the same time, totally passive presentations also lack any passion that tells management how important the issue is to the members. If you're so laid back and cool, management will think, "It's really no big deal, so why bother responding?"

So, what does a good presentation sound like? A solid, assertive presentation that does the job but stops short of being too aggressive?

Here are three basic steps. Not only will they work in grievance presentation, but in everyday life as well.

1. Make a simple but specific and factual statement of the issue.

You don't want to go to management and say something like, "The air's lousy, people don't like it."

You do want to go to management with a specific issue and a specific course of action:

"The union is concerned about the air quality on the third floor of the annex building. I and four of the workers who are being directly affected by this want to meet with you at noon tomorrow to talk about this and find a way to fix things."

2. Firmly say how you feel about the issue and why.

You don't want to get to a meeting and say something like "See, smell that? We don't like it."

You do want to get to a meeting and say something like, "As you can tell, the smell is obvious. We can't tell from the

odor what it is, but because there are so many potentially dangerous chemicals and solvents in use around here we are concerned about possible ill effects. People are worrying that this has gone on for several weeks now with no sign of letup."

3. Say specifically what you want done about the issue.

You don't say, "Do something." That leaves the door open to management's "solution" being the distribution of bathroom air fresheners or something equally unsatisfactory.

What you do say is something like this: "We believe it may be coming from the vent over that storage unit. We want you to direct Maintenance to explore the issue and, if necessary, bring in an outside engineering firm to help stop the flow of bad air. We also want an outside lab to take air samples and report back to the union and management on what they find. Let's talk about a schedule for these actions."

The goal is to be factual, direct and forceful: know what you want and get

across to management in an understandable, serious way what you want to see accomplished.

Keep in mind, of course, that this is only one part of grievance handling. You still have to do a good investigation, check the contract, organize and prepare your arguments and deal with management's counter-argu-

ments as well as build member support around the issue.

But all those steps will do you little good, at least in the short run, if management doesn't hear what you're trying to say.

— Ken Margolies. The writer is on the labor education faculty at Cornell University.

Maybe the problem isn't in the strength of your grievance, but in your presentation

You must state your case clearly and firmly and be specific about what you want