

Keeping Members United in Contentious Times

Imagine a few scenarios that you may confront in your workplace:

- A member comes to the union meeting in a “Black Lives Matter” T-shirt and suddenly other members quit talking to him.
- In the lunch room, members at one table are speaking in Spanish. Another member walks by and comments below her breath: “Can’t build that wall soon enough.”
- A newly-hired probationary worker comes to work on her first day wearing a Hijab, the headscarf worn by some Muslim women. No one welcomes her.
- A well-liked member announces she is gender transitioning and requests that people begin using a new name, Mark, instead of Marcia. The next day, Mark’s workstation is defaced with obscene graffiti.

In contentious times, members often don’t see eye to eye, generating division and rivalries that undermine solidarity. Increasing membership diversity can lead to misunderstandings, which can escalate to disrespect. As a steward, you play a critical role in keeping the membership united.

You have a leadership responsibility to retain the confidence of the members you represent across the range of views and opinions they hold. You are in a good position to talk with everyone and to get members talking to each other. Stewards can help members see past their differences to build the connections that keep the union strong.

Every situation is different. Sometimes it’s about promoting open-mindedness so members can listen to one another instead of talking past each other: *dialogue* rather than debate. It may be about influencing how one membership group views another, helping members with a certain perspective to stand in another’s shoes, or allowing members to express discomfort or

uncertainty without resorting to ridicule or name-calling. You don’t have to agree with a different point of view in order to understand it. The challenge is often to figure out where consensus is needed to support unity, and where it is OK to acknowledge differences.

In every situation it’s important to keep in mind what the union stands for, the common purpose and shared values that bring union members together and strengthen commitment. Unions operate on democratic principles where freedom of expression and diversity of thought and action are part of the landscape. How you respond matters! When you’re challenged to navigate potentially contentious conversations, or need to wade in to diffuse tensions, consider three techniques:

Respect – Learn – Relate.

Act with Respect

Members who feel they are being treated with respect are more likely to engage with you, be less defensive and remain committed to the union. In its simplest definition, respect means to show consideration for, or to treat as worthy of regard. Recognize that members from different backgrounds and life experiences are likely to hold different views. Listen with an open mind to learn what’s important to them *from their perspective*. Discovering underlying concerns or fears often reveal an opening you can use to diffuse tension or refocus the conversation consistent with union principles. Respect is key to encouraging members to connect to one another, find common ground or agree to disagree.

Focus on Learning

It’s not always easy to separate your own views from what a member may be saying, especially if you strongly disagree. While you want to insist that language be respectful, you’ll often have an urge to shut down an offensive member. If you

do, your opportunity to influence how that member is thinking becomes closed off. Instead, try asking questions to clarify that member’s intent before jumping to assumptions. Then suspend judgement while listening. “Can you give me some specifics?” “What concerns you about that?” “From your perspective, what does that mean?” Listen for information you can use to move the conversation in a way that leads to new understandings, identifies common ground or diffuses tension. Check back for understanding. “Are you telling me you feel uncomfortable about ‘Black Lives Matter’ because you think that means yours doesn’t? How do you know that’s what the guy in the T-shirt thinks? Have you asked him to explain what it means to him?”

Relate: Relationships are Powerful

Navigating membership relations in contentious times isn’t easy. Recognize your own emotions first. Self-awareness helps you act strategically—keeping the best interests of the union front and center. Try putting yourself in the other person’s place. Finding those areas where you can genuinely express empathy with another’s perspective communicates respect, even while recognizing difference. Finally, strive for mutual solutions. Unity is strengthened when outcomes work for everyone.

Building connections with members, and between membership and the union, is powerful. Unity is strengthened when all members feel respected, feel good about themselves and recognize they are dependent on each other to protect their jobs and their families’ futures. That’s what collective action is all about.

—Susan Woods. The writer is a workplace facilitator and trainer who taught Labor Studies courses for many years. For a quick overview of an advocacy approach to conflict resolution, see: <http://www.hendersonwoodsllc.com/documents/CollaborativeConflictResolution.pdf>