

Making Your Goals Clear

We have all been at bad meetings: they start late, no one is sure when they're suppose to end, some people are raising their hands to speak, others are just speaking out, there is no written agenda or time limit, and usually not much gets done. People leave frustrated.

One big reason meetings like this happen is that too little attention is paid to something called "definition" — an understanding by all involved of what's being talked about or done, and why.

Without definition, most of the things a steward does can fail as miserably as the meeting described above. You say "oranges" but others hear "apples." Not only aren't the people you represent on the "same page" as you, some aren't in the same book. At grievance meetings with management it's as if you're broadcasting on the FM band, and they are receiving only on AM.

Lack of definition can make people confused, agitated and sometimes even hostile. These disastrous consequences are avoidable. Here are some examples that show how lack of definition can get in a steward's way — and what can be done about it.

1 A steward asks three members who are unhappy with management's new attendance policy to get together and talk about it after work. The meeting starts off with a lot of energy but people leave frustrated and annoyed over "spinning our wheels" and all the "loose ends."

What happened? At least two very important things were left undefined in the steward's outreach: the purpose of the meeting and how long it would last.

The steward thought the meeting was to find out how the policy was being implemented — that is, for fact finding. One member, though, thought it was to vent about the unfair policy and the idiots in management. Another member thought it was about planning a job action. Yet a third member kept insisting he want-

ed to hear what the lawyers had to say. The result: the discussion bounced around like a pinball from one topic to the other.

Making it worse, the steward thought they had an hour to meet, but two of the members got up suddenly after 45 minutes saying they had to get to a softball game.

If the steward had defined with everyone at the beginning of the meeting — or, better still, *before* the meeting — the exact purpose of the meeting and how long it would last, they would have had a better session. With at least two more things defined at the end of the meeting — what they accomplished or decided and where they would go from here — they would not have been so frustrated and they would have left the meeting much more ready to take the next steps.

2 Another steward had a grievance meeting with a member and management over discipline. It went badly. Management kept talking directly to the member trying to get a confession or make a deal, and the member first started yelling and then let management know he was interested in the deal.

The problem? Lack of definition. The steward didn't clearly define the roles the member and the steward would play and what to do if management acted badly or made an offer. The steward also didn't define for management some ground rules for the meeting, including that management should deal directly with the steward as the member's union representative — not the member. Again, a little definition would have gone a long way.

3 Another steward, having just come back from internal organizing training, was eager to get members more active in the union. One by one the steward approached members to find out what was on their minds. One by one the members gave the steward a list of things the steward could fix for them. Oops — more definition needed. The members

had one definition of a union: "member complains, steward fixes things." The steward and the union need to convince members that the definition of a union is "we identify issues together and WE work together to solve them."

As you go through your steward and other activities, interacting with others, notice how things go. When they are not going so well (people are not listening to each other, nothing is getting done, people are "jumping down each other's throats," and so on) see if you can identify something important that has been left undefined by the group. Then see if you can improve the situation by suggesting a clarification of one or more of the factors causing the problems. You'll start to agree that "definition" can make a big difference.

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

What Needs to be Defined

Following are examples of areas that need to be defined. You'll no doubt encounter more in your work as a steward.

- **Agendas** (What are we here for? In what order will the items be discussed? What action, if any, are we taking on each item?)
- **Time limits** (starting and ending times, how long each can speak, how much time will be spent on a particular subject)
- **Roles** (Are people there to only listen, or to participate? Who chairs? Who speaks? Who votes?)
- **Rules** (how to get recognized to speak, no yelling, don't repeat yourself, stay on the topic)
- **Issues** (Exactly what are we talking about? What do we want to do with the issue? What are the various positions people hold on the issue?)
- **What** was accomplished and next steps (What did we decide or do? What are the loose ends? Who will do what? By when?)