

CHAPTER 2

ROLE OF THE CHAPTER REPRESENTATIVE

The heart of a dynamic and effective NTEU chapter is leadership provided by its elected officers and stewards.

The American labor movement's initial adoption of the steward concept appears to have occurred within the International Typographical Union (ITU), which was founded in the late 1850's under the leadership of its first president, Horace Greeley. Over the years, the steward's role has expanded from simply serving as an informal leader and collector of dues to performing such duties as membership recruiting, grievance processing, and serving the non-representational needs of the members. Frequently, the steward is the first -- and sometimes the only -- source of contact employees and supervisors have with NTEU.

All too frequently, union representatives have concentrated only on representing employees involved in personnel actions. Such a perception acknowledges only one phase of the representative's job. Another responsibility shared by all NTEU officers and stewards is to build the Union's strength by creating and promoting a local chapter operation which seeks to improve the quality of our members' lives. That is the trait which distinguishes a "union" from any other type of organization. As union representatives, we must all be committed to building a support network which serves the needs of our most vulnerable members. We will discuss this subject in more detail in Chapter 6.

I. The Steward's Job

Any attempt to provide an exhaustive listing of the specific tasks which stewards are required to perform would be fruitless. Such determinations are governed by a number of factors, such as size, composition, and mission of the represented workforce; the relationship between NTEU and the local management; operational demands; and the personality of the steward. However, we can identify a number of duties for which the steward is responsible.

A. Communicator

1. Serves as a two-way communications link between NTEU and its members, and with the bargaining unit as a whole.
2. Serves as a two-way communications link between management and bargaining unit employees.
3. Informs members of NTEU's policies, decisions, and activities.
4. Communicates the members' views to the chapter's officers and executive

board.

B. Educator

1. Explains NTEU's objectives to bargaining unit employees, including the importance of continually expanding union membership.
2. Informs members of their rights under contract and statutory law.
3. Informs members of available support services in the community and in the work place, as well as the benefits offered by NTEU.

C. Advocate

1. Enforces the contract and defends the rights of all employees; i.e., through grievances, partnership efforts, EEO complaints, etc.
2. Monitors and strives to improve working conditions.
3. Attempts to resolve work place issue that arise, on behalf of the bargaining unit.

D. Negotiator

1. Resolves issues of concern to the bargaining unit through interest-based or traditional negotiations with management.
2. Assists in resolving work place disputes through diplomatic intervention between parties in conflict.

E. Recruiter

1. Assists the Chapter President and Executive Board in developing a recruiting plan for the chapter.
2. Welcomes, befriends and recruits new employees.
3. Recruits new employees and other non-members.

F. Organizer

1. Promotes union programs and the principles of unionism.

2. Develops a spirit of solidarity and pride within the workforce.
3. Consolidates the energies and activities of the workers to achieve the union's objectives.
4. Organizes chapter events, such as Lunch n Learns, voter registration drives, blood donor days, etc.

G. Political/Legislative Activist

1. Involves bargaining unit in legislative activities regarding issues affecting Federal employees.
2. Educates the bargaining unit regarding political activities in which Federal employees may participate, including where, when and how they may do so.
3. Discusses with and interprets for NTEU members the legislation which affects their welfare and careers.

H. Leader

1. Serves as the voice of the bargaining unit in defending employees' rights.
2. Promotes the dignity of the worker.
3. Inspires the members to get involved in actions intended to make a positive change at the workplace.
4. Takes actions on behalf of the members -- all members.
5. Represents each member to the best of his/her ability.
6. Publicly promotes and works for the union's goals.
7. Promotes respect for the members.
8. Fights anti-union attitudes.

II. The Steward's Skills

The steward should "have the patience of a Job, the skin of a rhinoceros, the cunning of a fox, the courage of a lion, be as blind as a bat and silent as a sphinx." - Chinoy, Ely: Automobile Workers and The American Dream, 1955.

Although such a description projects a most intriguing image of a model steward, it is not terribly instructive. Therefore, the following segment examines in more specific detail the skills required of a steward.

A. Relate To Each Person As An Individual

The ability to relate to a wide range of personalities is essential to becoming an effective steward. That effectiveness depends largely on the steward's ability to gain the trust of both coworkers and supervisory personnel. Instrumental in developing that confidence among coworkers is the willingness to assist them in reaching resolution of their problems. Toward that end, a steward must exhibit a sincere, helpful, and understanding attitude in daily interactions with coworkers.

Furthermore, as one of the steward's principal responsibilities is to resolve the problems confronting NTEU members, a steward needs to establish working relationships with management personnel that will engender positive resolutions to those problems.

B. Treat Employees And Supervisors With Respect

Treating others with the respect we would demand for ourselves is fundamental to the skill inventory of a successful steward.

One of the objectives of the early American labor movement was the advancement of the dignity of the worker. Today, that expectation continues to burn brightly.

In the sterile setting of a training environment, the idea that a steward should treat others with respect appears fundamental. Yet, when we recognize that the term "others" extends beyond our coworkers to include supervisory personnel, that seemingly basic concept suddenly becomes less understandable.

The idea of treating others with respect does not mean caving in to management, being subservient, or otherwise backing down. Under the law, a steward is on an equal footing with a supervisor in the labor-management relationship. In order to be effective in that relationship, the steward must be able to discuss matters intelligently, maturely, and forcefully, within an atmosphere of respect.

Perhaps the most important quality, then, for a steward to possess, is that of integrity. A solid reputation for having integrity will create the foundation for open communications with both coworkers and managers, which can then bring about positive resolutions to work place problems.

C. Attempt To Identify And Understand Others' Points Of View

A steward's effectiveness is heightened by the ability to interact and communicate with others. A significant factor in this successful communication process is the ability to recognize, to understand, and to tolerate contrary points of view. For example, the steward must refrain from jumping to quick conclusions regarding the validity of an employee's complaint or the authenticity of a supervisor's explanation on the basis of personality factors. The steward must seek to determine all relevant facts before selecting a course of action. Here, flexibility is an important trait to bring to the table.

D. Be Alert For Sources Of Employee Irritation

A prominent aspect of the steward's leadership function is striving to improve working conditions and to give workers opportunities to make decisions governing their daily work lives. Achievement of this objective depends on the steward's sensitivity to the concerns of employees, the ability to determine which complaints are justified, and a willingness to work toward the resolution of employee concerns.

E. Investigate And Evaluate Each Complaint

Employee complaints flow from a broad range of motivations: e.g., correcting an actual problem, avenging a personality clash, a genuine misunderstanding with a supervisor, or a general dissatisfaction with the work environment. Regardless of the steward's initial reaction to the complainant, he/she is responsible for thoroughly investigating each complaint and selecting a final course of action. Specifically, the steward should:

1. Listen closely to the employee's complaint.
2. Ask clarifying questions, and listen again.
3. Determine what the proper condition or standard should be.
4. Evaluate all pertinent information.
5. Discuss the matter with the chapter's president and/or chief steward and decide on the best course of action to take.

F. Act On Complaints And Follow Up To Ensure Prompt Action By Management

Deciding which course of action to pursue is one of the steward's greatest challenges. If the contract has been violated, the employee lodging the complaint generally should be encouraged to file a grievance. If the complaint requires the

filing of an administrative appeal or complaint, such as an appeal to the Merit Systems Protection Board (MSPB) or to the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, the employee should be informed of that option and advised on the correct procedures for engaging that process.

The filing of a grievance or other administrative appeal may not always be the appropriate first step in attempting to resolve a specific complaint. A steward's personal intervention may be adequate to correct a problem. For example, complaints regarding the room temperature in a specific work area may be resolved most easily by discussing the problem with the agency official responsible for adjusting the thermostat in that work area. If the problem continually occurs, then a stronger tactic, such as filing a grievance, may be necessary.

Once a complaint has been filed, promptly follow up to determine whether management has acted to correct the problem. If management is unable or unwilling to act on a justifiable complaint, the steward should consider pursuing more formal action. The steward must stay aware of and comply with applicable deadlines.

Some complaints will not warrant further action. When such a situation occurs, the employee registering the complaint should be informed of this decision in an explanatory, considerate manner.

G. Promptly Inform Employees Of The Changing Status Of Their Cases

Given the fact that employees spend a good part of their lives at the workplace, their keen interest in the status of their complaints, grievances, and formal appeals is not surprising. Therefore, stewards are expected to immediately inform employees of the changing status of their complaints.

In this context, stewards should recognize and exploit the public relations and recruiting value to be derived from demonstrating to coworkers the Union's concern for their welfare. Keeping employees well informed of changes in the workplace and in the status of their grievances, etc., is not only an obligation, but it makes good sense as well.

H. Communicate With The Members

The adage that information prompts interest which, in turn, promotes involvement has no truer application than in the steward's daily activities. The more the member knows and understands about NTEU, the more active that member will become. It is essential that stewards inform coworkers of the Union's policies and decisions. Likewise, stewards are responsible for communicating the members' views to chapter officers.

The opportunity to serve as a chapter representative can be a most challenging and rewarding experience. A person's selection to that position clearly acknowledges others' recognition of the chapter representative's leadership skills. Success comes to those representatives who are committed not only to providing effective representation at the work site and involving employees in positively affecting the workplace, but to improving and expanding the types of services offered by the Union in order to make it more meaningful to members and more attractive to non-members. Service to the needs of NTEU members should be our guiding principle. TOGETHER, WE CAN, AND DO, improve the lives of our members.

III. Information The Steward Needs

A. The Union

1. Its organizational structure. This can be most easily understood through a review of the NTEU organizational chart that should be in your chapter's files, or is available from our National Office.
2. Its officers and lines of authority. Review the NTEU National Constitution and By-Laws for this information.
3. Its policies. For this, look at your chapter by-laws.
4. Its services, benefits and resources. See the NTEU Benefits Guide.

B. Bargaining Unit Employees

1. Name, position title, grade, office location, office phone number, entry-on-duty date, and NTEU membership status of each employee within the steward's area of responsibility. (Chapter No. 3, Membership Building, Attachment No. 1). A report with this information is sent by the NTEU National Office to the chapters on a periodic basis.
2. The concerns and problems affecting employees within the steward's area of responsibility. Do chapter surveys, attend group meetings, hold chapter meetings: listen, listen, listen to what employees say they need!

C. The Employing Agency - all of this should be available from the National Office of the employing agency.

1. Its organizational structure.
2. Its mission.
3. Its lines of authority, including the names and titles of the principal officials.

4. Its policies in dealing with the Union and the workers.

D. The Workplace - this should be available from local management.

1. Its organizational structure.
2. The mission of each organizational component.
3. The lines of authority, including the name, title, and work location of each supervisor and management official.
4. Problems experienced by the workers.

E. The Contract - available in every chapter office.

1. Its contents: rights and obligations.
2. Its protections.
3. The interpretation given to the contract's provisions by the parties and previous arbitration decisions.
4. The procedures for filing a grievance, including the time limits at each step.
5. Advantages and disadvantages of the various contract provisions. Discuss this with your Chapter President and Chief Steward.

IV. Required Materials - These items should be in the chapter office. For NTEU Benefit Guides, and NTEU buttons, and other items with our name, contact the National Office, if they are not available in your chapter office.

A. New Member Kit

1. Contract.
2. Chapter by-laws.
3. NTEU National Constitution.
4. NTEU Buttons.
5. List of chapter officers and stewards, including their work phone numbers.
6. Copy of the most recent issue of the NTEU Bulletin and the chapter newsletter.
7. Any other Union literature available.

8. List of benefits of membership and benefit brochures.
- B. The Contract.**
 - C. The National and Chapter Constitution and By-Laws.**
 - D. Name, address, phone numbers (work and residence), and NTEU membership status of each employee in the steward's area of responsibility. (Chapter No. 3, Membership Building, Attachment No. 1). Ask your Chapter President to share this with you.**
 - E. Dues withholding forms (Standard Form 1187).**
 - F. NTEU Cash Membership Payment forms.**
 - G. Grievance forms.**
 - H. Manila folders for establishing individual grievance files.**
 - I. Filing system and cabinet space in union office.**
 - J. A copy of the Civil Service Reform Act, Title VII.**
 - K. NTEU insurance forms.**