

NTEU Chapter 52 Steward Reference Guide

CHAPTER 1 STEWARDS ROLES/SKILLS REPRESENTATION

ROLES & REPRESENTATION

I. STEWARD'S ROLE

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

A. RECRUITER

1. Develops a recruiting plan.
2. Welcomes and befriends new employees.
3. Recruits new employees and other non-members.

B. ORGANIZER

1. Promotes union programs and the principles of unionism.
2. Develops a spirit of solidarity and pride within the workforce.

C. LEADER

1. Defends the worker against insensitivity, arrogance, and reprisals of Management.
2. Promotes the dignity of the worker.
3. Inspires members to get involved in making positive changes at the workplace.
4. Speaks on behalf of 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 members. Fights anti-union attitudes.
8. Fights anti-union attitudes.

II. 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 coworkers and supervisory personnel. To develop that confidence, the steward must assist coworkers in a sincere, helpful, and understanding manner.

One of the steward's principal responsibilities is to resolve problems confronting NTEU members. To that end, we must seek to eliminate all barriers, including impediments to effective communication with management.

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 advancement of the Worker's dignity. 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 into management, being subservient, or otherwise backing down. Being on an equal footing with any management official, a steward must be able to discuss matters intelligently, maturely, and assertively.

C. ATTEMPT TO IDENTIFY AND UNDERSTAND OTHER PEOPLE'S 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, understand, and 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 final course of action.

D. BE ALERT FOR SOURCES OF EMPLOYEE IRRITATION

A prominent aspect of the steward's leadership function is striving to improve 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 elimination of employee irritants.

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 complaint, 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.
3. Determine what the proper condition or standard should be.

4. Discuss the matter with the chapter's president or chief steward, if there are questions regarding the best course of action.
5. Evaluate all pertinent information.
6. Determine whether the complaint warrants further action.
7. Select the most appropriate course of action.

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 the correct procedures for engaging that process.

The filing of a grievance or other administrative appeal may not always be an appropriate first step. 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.

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 workers spend a good part of their lives at the workplace, their 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.

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 the workers within their areas of the Union's policies and decisions. Likewise, stewards are responsible for communicating the member's 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. It comes from 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. Servicing the needs of NTEU members should be our guiding principle. TOGETHER WE CAN improve the lives of our members.