



STEWARDS CORNER

Monthly Newsletter for Union Stewards

Steward as a Problem Solver

Acting as a problem-solver requires stewards to interact with management. This happens when you represent coworkers who are being questioned by management (watch [Weingarten Rights](#)), present a grievance to management, investigate potential violations of the collective bargaining agreement (CBA), or just work to resolve the daily issues on the shop floor. Whatever the situation, it's essential to understand the special status that empowers stewards to perform these critical duties.

Equality Principle

When a worker serves as a steward, they are acting as an exclusive bargaining agent. In these instances, stewards have rights that regular employees do not have, including the right to disagree with and ask management questions, and to caucus with members who are subject to management interrogation. In these situations, you are an equal to management.

Regular employees must comply with instructions from their supervisors. Failure to do so may result in discipline for insubordination. The four-word phrase to remember is "**obey now, grieve later.**" (Unless of course there is a risk of serious injury)

These rights, commonly known as the **Equality Principle**, derive from the National Labor Relations Act (NLRA). The NLRA covers workers in private-sector workplaces; public employees in state and municipal government may be protected by applicable state laws (check with your Local Union President or Staff Representative if you are in this category).

The Equality Principle empowers you to fully represent your members and protects you from retaliation.

However, it is not a blank check. Stewards lose the protection of the Equality Principle if they make threats of violence or use gender or racial slurs.

Bottom line: When you step into your steward role, you should make clear to management that you are acting as a Union representative. This activates your rights under the Equality Principle.

Working with the Boss

Developing a good working relationship with a boss can make a difference in resolving issues. This doesn't mean that you have to become buddies with management; but if you can cultivate a mutually respectful relationship then you will likely be able to solve problems more effectively. Be fair, listen to each side, and take notes of your discussions with management. When an issue occurs, don't just tell management about it; show them why it's a problem with evidence to support your position. If you raise trivial items, it may affect your ability to resolve concerns that have merit later.

Some supervisors are tough to deal with. They may be evasive, refuse to give straight answers, or may blow up at the first question. It's not always easy, but stewards that are persistent and reasonable will get through to most supervisors. If you have a particularly difficult supervisor to work with, talk to your grievance chair, local president, or staff representative for ideas of what to do. Sometimes we have to work together and organize to make the changes we need.



The role of a steward is the key piece in the message that we must always impart to members. The steward is the link between our mission as union leaders and our Union family. It is the important link for this chain to be strong and firm. Local Union committees are also integral to this effort.

As a Women Steel activist, I've met with my legislators and told them the concerns I've heard from my coworkers about issues that affect them on the job.

— Mariel Cruz, President, USW Local 6871, District 4 (Puerto Rico)



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Conducting Interviews

Grievance investigations involve a lot of pieces. Stewards ask questions and sift through evidence like the fictional detectives Nancy Drew and Sherlock Holmes. The 5WH questions (**who, what, when, where, why, how**) are helpful tools to help stewards assess potential grievances.

Interviews are an excellent format to ask these questions, and to verify or disestablish information you have been given. These meetings usually involve a witness/grievant and one or two stewards. Here are some useful tips to keep in mind for your next Interview:

Prior to the Interview

- Find a quiet place to conduct the Interview. The fewer distractions, the better.
- Interviews take time. Schedule plenty of time for the discussion.
- If possible, two stewards are ideal: one to ask the questions, the other to take notes.
- Ask the witness to write their story (statement) before the meeting. This prompts them to think through the issue and involves them in the process.

Questions to think about before the Interview

- What do you already know about the situation?
- What do you need to know? Write out a list of questions to ask the grievant/witness.

During the Interview

- Turn cell phones off.
- Assure the person that the interview will help the Union.
- Listen. Don't interrupt or finish what the witness is saying.
- The questions you ask lead to the answers you get
- Start with open-ended questions that can't be answered with short responses. (Example: Can you describe the attitude of your supervisor when all this was going on?)
- Yes/no questions = yes/no answers.
- Ask one question at a time.
- If the member mentions documents ask for a copy; get the names of all witnesses.

After the Interview

- Read the notes to the witness to ensure they reflect the Interview.
- Look for gaps or inconsistencies that might need explanation.
- Date, label, and store the interview notes with other material from the grievance.

Don't play the Telephone Game.

If you've ever played the "Telephone Game," it will be clear why interviews are an effective tool for investigating grievances. The game starts with a person whispering something into the person's ear next to them, who tells the person next to them, and so on. Finally, the last person in line says the message out loud, and, in most cases, it's completely different from how it started. Cumulative errors are funny in the Telephone Game, but not in grievance handling.



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