

New Stewards Take Note!

You were just elected as steward for your section or work area. Congratulations. Today is the first day of your new life. With that title comes the important responsibility of defending the union and its members.

All too often stewards are thrown into the thick of things before they have the proper training. Since Steward Training is not available on a regular basis, here are some tips for the new stewards.

First of all, remember that as a steward of the union you have the support of your local, your international union and the thousands of members who comprise the union. That means that if you don't know the answer to questions or are not familiar with procedures, ask your local leadership. With your position comes a huge responsibility and you need to be able to provide the right answers to members and follow the correct procedures in your dealings with management. Your members will respect you for following this simple advice.

Take your time. Listen carefully. Write things down. Buy yourself a spiral notebook and begin to document your activities. If you investigate a grievance, write down the 5W's in your notebook or on the grievance investigation sheet that the local provides with the grievance form.

Be on your toes. You will be tested by management the moment you become a steward. Think of it as hazing. But don't give in. Act professional and be aware of your rights. Your supervisor or manager will probably try to tell you what you can or cannot do as a steward. Remember you are hearing this information from a self-serving and biased source.

Know your rights. You are management's equal in all matters relating to the contract and the union-employer relationship. Your contract may outline some of your rights as a steward but much of it has a legal basis. That means the "sit down and shut up" mentality of some supervisors is incorrect, unprofessional, and in some cases downright illegal. If you are denied rights which make your defense of a member impossible, make sure your local is aware of this situation--immediately.

Check out our local's Steward Update on a regular basis for grievance guidance. You will also receive the Steward's Update newsletter on a regular basis. As you read over it, highlight those items of particular interest. Keep a file for them so that you can easily refer back to them when needed.

You are a representative of your union to your members. Introduce yourself and greet new hires. Be the strongest advocate for the union on the property. Pass along information from your local. Squelch any rumor before it spreads. Work together with your local's officers. That means the politics of the past union election, if there was one, is over. You are part of the team.

If a member comes to you with a complaint that could be grievable, investigate it quickly and professionally. Resolve the issue in the quickest and fairest way. Don't make the member wait unnecessarily for an answer. Tell him/her that you will get back to them with an answer and then get back to them. If the issue is not grievable, see if there is a way to resolve it.

If there is no grievance, be honest with the member but explain why the issue is not a grievance under your agreement. Work with other stewards so that they are aware of the issues you have been presented with. You don't want a member going behind your back to another steward because he/she did not agree with your decision not to press a complaint.

Read everything you can about your work--your local web site, your IAM magazine, Steward Update, the daily newspaper, and labor books. Make sure education is part of your union's regular business.