

TAMI

E D U C A T O R

Update for Stewards *Vol. 10, No. 4*



**The
Power
of Questions**

The Power of Questions

When you are tempted to make a statement, ask a question instead.”

That valuable advice came from Fred Ross, Sr., the veteran organizer who was a mentor to the legendary Cesar Chavez, a founder of the United Farm Workers union. Ross was teaching the power of questions to provoke people to action, gather needed information, share knowledge, and focus their attention.

Stewards would be wise to include this tactic in the chest of tools they use when advocating for their co-workers. Here's the how and why:

The best questions are open ended, meaning they can't be answered yes or no, but rather require a detailed answer. You also have to ask clear questions to get good results, of course, but there is more to effective questioning. Stewards also need to learn about timing, tone and knowing which type of question to use for different situations.

Timing: When to Ask Questions

If a member comes to you with a problem, let the member talk and express emotion before you start asking questions. Otherwise the member may not be able to focus and give good answers or will keep getting distracted and going back to talking about how he or she feels.

Other times, like the TV detective *Columbo*, you want to ask a question when someone is not expecting it and doesn't have his or her defenses up. For example, when you are interviewing a supervisor about a potential grievance, you might say just before leaving, “By the way, what were the words you used to ask John to do that assignment?”

When you want people's feedback on an idea or whether they will volunteer for something, you want to make sure they have all the information they need before asking for their response. If you ask too quickly, they may give feedback that's not useful or give you a no because you didn't make a good enough case.

The Tone of Your Questions

Before asking questions make sure the person you are interviewing is comfortable and ready to talk. Don't start firing questions before you've done some relationship building.

In most cases your question should have a tone that conveys that you really want to know what someone else has to say.

Don't come off like a prosecutor or police interrogator—you won't get people to open up to you. If you seem in a hurry or not all that interested in what the person is saying, you will also not get good results.

But if you sound sympathetic and caring and use a gentle voice and nonaccusatory language, you are likely to learn a lot more.

Often we don't realize how we sound to others when asking questions, so it's good to get feedback from others or listen to yourself and gauge the reactions you are getting so you can adjust your tone.

Questions that Provoke Action

Let's say you are trying to get members to come to a meeting to discuss how to correct safety problems where you work. Which do you think will engage members more effectively: “Please come to a meeting about a very important safety issue” or “Do you feel safe knowing that some of our equipment has caused several accidents?”

Someone once said that what organizers do is “point out the spot” as in, “did you know you have a spot on your sleeve?” This makes the person with the spot very aware of it and most likely concerned enough to try to hide it or clean it or change clothes.

In that same vein a question such as “How do you feel about the way our supervisor talks to us?” might stimulate more action than making a statement like “We don't have to take being spoken to like children.”

Once people express themselves about the issue, then ask, “What do you think we should do about it?” to get every-

one focused on solving the problem.

Questioning in Grievance Investigations

When dealing with a member who's approaching you with a potential grievance, start by asking, “What happened?” and let the member talk without interruption. Follow up

with questions that are increasingly more specific and guiding. For example: “You said there was a lot of time between the first and second times the supervisor spoke to you. About how many minutes would you estimate that was?”

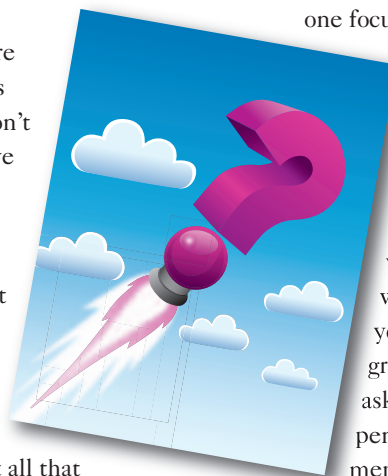
When questioning management, take a different approach. You should be very understanding and let it be known that you only want to know what happened and whether a grievance is filed depends on that information. Do not argue the case or disagree with the supervisor. If you want information that might be helpful, just ask questions and give lots of encouragement to keep the supervisor talking: “I know you must have had reasons for what you did. Please explain those to me.” Do a lot of head nodding and say “I see” and “What happened next?”

Questions as Teaching Tools

Using questions to help people learn goes back at least to the time of the Greek philosopher Socrates. Rather than telling people things, ask questions like “In negotiations, why would you want the other party to make the first proposal?” Through discussion of possible answers people figure it out together. That way they understand it better, remember it longer and in the process learn how to learn.

One last thought. As a steward, how can you apply what you just read?

—Ken Margolies. The writer is senior associate at Cornell University's Worker Institute.



Getting Members to Help Out

Different kinds of unions operate in different kinds of ways, but they all have a lot in common, and especially this: understanding that the more people who pitch in, the more effective their union becomes and the better job it can do for everyone.

The question is, how do unions get more people to volunteer their time and energies? How do you find and recruit the people you need to make the union as strong and effective as you know it can be?

Here's a way that has proven successful in a lot of unions. It may well work for yours.

To begin with, think of your own work area and the tasks you face as a steward. Think of all the things that could make the union more effective. With that as a starting point, talk with your union leadership, grievance committee, executive board, brother and sister stewards—whatever and whoever is appropriate in your setting—and ask for help in identifying the members in your workplace who may be potential new activists.

At the first meeting of this leadership group, discuss what type of assistance is needed: newsletter writers, social, health and safety, community outreach or other committee members, additional shop stewards, and so forth. Once these needs have been established, distribute to everyone in the group a membership list of the local, the various work areas, shifts or whatever membership breakdown is appropriate in your situation. Go through members' names, one-by-one, and talk about each person, looking at each for the qualities you need in an activist. Try to remember if anyone on the list has ever expressed an interest in getting more involved. (Almost every time I have done this exercise, participants have found at

least one member who has indicated a desire to play a more active role in the union, but no one had ever followed up and recruited him or her to a specific task.) Put a check by the name of each member who is a prospective new union activist.

Next, develop a plan to talk to every possible activist on a one-on-one basis. Divide their names among your group.

Don't take more people than you think you can reasonably handle. Schedule a period of time, usually between one and two weeks, to talk to the prospective activists. These individual discussions can take place during lunch breaks, before or after work, or during visits to their homes.

How do you make the approach? One way to start the discussion with each person is by asking how he or she feels things are going in the workplace or the union. What issues are of concern? Whatever the response, listen! Too often we talk too much to actually hear what members are really thinking. Make the connection between whatever it is that

concerns the member and how the member's increased participation would help resolve the problem. For instance, if the member is concerned with the speed of grievance processing, and you know

for a fact that the union is being hampered by having too few stewards, you might say: "I understand what you mean. I think we are doing a pretty good job considering the number of stewards we have. We are all working hard. But we have a number of unfilled steward positions. If someone like you were to agree to become a steward, we could do an even better job in handling grievances."

Keep in mind that members may have skills to offer that might not match the positions you need to fill. Be flexible—never reject someone who's willing to help the union cause. If someone is artistic, you might ask him to help keep the union bulletin board up to date and looking neat, or to draw a picture or cartoon for the newsletter. If someone has only a little bit of time to commit, ask her to hand out leaflets or help make phone calls for a union project every so often. Remember, the more members who are active, even in a small way, the more effective the union.

Keep in mind that the members may need time to think about your request. Don't pressure them: when people volunteer for a job they really don't want, they frequently don't perform very well. If necessary, give the people you are talking to time to decide, and follow up with them after an agreed upon period.

At the next meeting of your leadership group discuss each person with whom you talked. Who decided to volunteer on the spot? What has to be done to get him or her started in the position? Which approaches worked and which did not? What would the group recommend to convince individuals who seem interested in helping but haven't quite committed? Would it help if someone else in the group, or another union leader, came with you the next time you spoke to the person? If someone was unable to talk to everyone on their list, can someone else in the group help out?

Set a period of time for follow-up discussions or uncompleted contacts and schedule another meeting of the group in a week or two. This program takes a little time and effort, but it can pay off in huge dividends. When you realize that the whole exercise can be planned and executed in a matter of weeks, and that you can emerge from it with a bunch of new people willing to help the union do its vital work, you'll see it's well worth your investment.

Find tasks that fit with busy schedules.

Ask for help in identifying potential new activists.

Don't Settle for Management's "No!"

Many stewards hear the word "no" more often than they would like. It might happen like this:

A member comes to you with what seems like a clean grievance. She was bypassed for overtime, and your investigation reveals that she was most senior but was never asked. Seems like an open-and-shut case.

You set up a meeting with management to get it straightened out. After all, it's clear that the supervisor simply committed an oversight. But when you get into the meeting, management goes into this song and dance routine about how there was emergency work and the supervisor needed to assign someone without going to the seniority list.

Your jaw drops, your muscles tighten and it takes all your effort not to explode. You have just entered the world of grievance denial. What happened?

Bad Decisions

Chances are the supervisor on duty made a poor decision and management is now using the excuse of emergency work as a cover. Of course a member who was unfairly denied the overtime should have gotten the work, and the money for it, but management doesn't like to admit it makes mistakes. So it compounds the mistake and gets the union and member angry.

Here's another scenario. Your shop has enjoyed a particular practice for many years. There is nothing in the contract that deals with the practice but a new supervisor decides to end it. You protest through the grievance procedure and are told the grievance is denied. When you ask why, the supervisor reads you the management rights clause of the agreement.

We may have to live with bad answers and grievance denials, but that doesn't mean we have to accept them without fighting back.

Talk to the Grievant

First, explain to the grievant what just happened and make it clear that the union will not allow management to play games with what the union sees as a legitimate grievance.

Next, research and document the grievance thoroughly, if you have not already done so. Make sure that your notes of the first level meeting go into the union's file in case the second step appeal is handled by someone else. Be sure that the record is complete. Talk to the chief shop steward, executive board member, or local officer so that the proper person can make the strongest case on appeal to the next step.

Always consider management's reason for the denial, but remember that your rebuttal to that reason is not necessarily the union's primary argument. If a member is passed over for overtime and there was no real emergency, stick to your guns about the contract language that calls for selection by seniority. If the supervisor hides behind the management rights clause in a past practice case—and they often will—insist that the employer consider the practice as part of the unwritten agreement between both sides. Show that the practice has been ongoing for a long enough time period that it appears to reasonable people that this is the way both sides conduct their business.

What About No Answer?

Suppose the supervisor doesn't answer your written grievance within the time limits set out in your agreement. Unless your contract says otherwise, the union must then choose to move the grievance up on appeal to the next step.

If you use a single grievance form which has a space on it for management's reply, write in, "not answered in a timely manner," and appeal to step 2. Be careful: don't mess up on *your own* time limits.

When a supervisor does not reply to a grievance, it is usually because he or she is overworked, negligent, can't make a decision or won't make a decision. Senior managers frequently complain that their worst nightmare in the grievance process is going to arbitrations in which their lower people did not answer the appeals and the union progressed the grievance. Most of the time, they'll settle the grievance rather than find themselves in that situation.

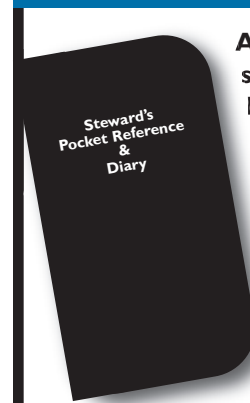
Keep Appealing

The key is not to let management control the grievance procedure through denial or refusals to reply. Their hope is that denial or silence might make the grievance go away.

As frustrating as it is for a steward confronted with these tactics, they cannot be allowed to divert the union from its primary task of defending members' rights on the job.

—Robert Wechsler. The writer is a veteran labor educator.

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Stewards and *Kaizen*

K*aizen* is a Japanese term that literally translated means “taking things apart and putting them back together better.” In the world of work, however, *kaizen* is often an employer strategy for “continuous improvement.” For stewards, that can mean “continuous problems” when jobs are combined, new technology is brought in, workers are disciplined for failing to adapt and the workplace is—as the term proclaims—in a state of constant change.

Management occasionally does something right, and the basic thought behind *kaizen* is one of those things. Applied to the union, *kaizen* means that stewards

should constantly try to improve their skills, by learning new ideas and approaches and sharing best practices. Most importantly, *kaizen* is not just a changing set of skills, but an *attitude*—the recognition that labor relations is constantly changing and that stewards have to keep up.

Employers Change, Stewards Must As Well

It is disturbing how many stewards are so set in their ways that learning new things is not part of their daily practice. Many have learned from experience how to process a grievance and usually how to anticipate that it would—if the planets were properly aligned—go to arbitration in a year or so. After all, this is the format that they have used for years. The problem, of course, is that employer attitudes toward unions, stewards and grievances have dramatically worsened over the past few years and simply “keeping on keeping on” is a loser’s strategy.

Stewards understand that their employers are constantly training them in new work techniques. Many of them even take classes outside of work to improve their work skills. Why shouldn’t they exert the same efforts to improve their union skills?

Most stewards have no systematic contact with other stewards from their own union; there’s little opportunity for

stewards to regularly get together and swap information and strategies—even though we know that management consistently meets for these reasons, often with an outside consultant on both work issues and anti-union strategies.

More important, stewards usually have no contact with their counterparts in other unions, whose experiences and practices are often different. As every football fan knows, coaches compulsively watch the tape of all the other teams to see what new formations or plays they can pick up. Stewards need to develop this same broad approach—after all, a steward from another union might actually know some play that could be helpful to you.

So, what’s a shrewd steward to do?

- First, get the *kaizen* attitude. Be determined to learn as much about union work as you know about your job.

- Be honest about how successful you, and your union as a whole, have been in resolving workplace problems. If you have hundreds, or even thousands, of grievances backed up, and for long periods of time, the process is broken and you need to fix it. Remember that every unresolved grievance is one more disgruntled member. Who needs *that*?

- Be proactive about improving your skills as you handle grievances. Many of us at work, particularly in the crafts, are constantly involved with self-improvement, learning new skills, especially where certification or licensing is required. Use the same aggressive approach to learning union skills.

- Think strategically about how you are going to win a grievance as quickly as possible. Learning how to use the leverage of your brother and sister workers is key to changing the power relationship between a steward and a supervisor; often new information helps tip the balance in your favor.

For stewards, *kaizen* means constant efforts to improve your union skills.

Be determined to learn as much about union work as you know about your job.

- One of the most common failures of a steward is being reactive—waiting until the boss does something bad to the members before moving into action. Stewards who just react are always the victims because the boss—thinking strategically—has made the first move and defined the issue. That leaves the steward playing catch-up.

- Become one of the people with that fancy-sounding name: an autodidact, meaning one who teaches him or herself, and who usually learns better than someone sitting in a classroom listening.

- Develop a regular way to get new information about handling grievances. Look at online sites for changes in labor law, for example, that might help you gain leverage. At the very least, in the narratives of the cases you read about you will see other union representatives, just like you, dealing with the same sorts of problems you have.

- Figure out a way for the other stewards in your local to swap strategies. After all, a steward who is successful in resolving grievances must have some techniques that you could use. Even if your local doesn’t officially sponsor such exchanges,

be proactive and go looking for them.

- Spread your best practices. If your local does not have regular steward meetings, it makes great sense to create an electronic home, either as a website or

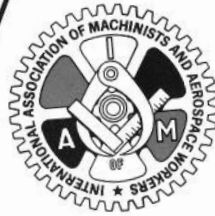
Facebook page, for stewards

to share their problems and their successes, creating a local-wide dialogue on how best to make the boss back off. As a strategic consideration, you have to decide whether to make these sites private, so stewards can speak honestly.

Finally, stewards have to remember the old adage: either we’re moving forward or we’re being pushed back. There is no *status quo*, so stewards have to take this challenge of learning new skills and strategies, as individuals and for their union as a whole.

— Bill Barry. The writer recently retired as director of labor studies at the Community College of Baltimore County.

**International
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Machinists and
Aerospace Workers**



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OFFICE OF THE INTERNATIONAL PRESIDENT

Dear IAM Shop Steward,

As this edition of the *IAM Educator* was being written, our union was making final preparations for the 38th Grand Lodge Convention in Toronto, Ontario, Canada. Delegates, some of them Stewards, were elected by each local lodge in the United States and Canada to represent their members at one of our oldest and proudest traditions, the Grand Lodge Convention.

There have been many triumphs to celebrate and challenges to meet over the last 124 years. Delegates have always met those challenges with wisdom and foresight. As we near our 125-year mark, I think all would agree that corporate globalization and the resulting race to the bottom for workers everywhere is the greatest challenge of the new century.

That's why the theme for the 38th Convention is "Hope for All Who Toil." Fittingly, the phrase comes from a line in a poem that is the basis for Canada's national anthem, "O Canada." And it is Canada's proud tradition of progressive labor laws, universal health care, respect for human rights and women's rights that gives nations around the world an example to follow.

By the time you read this edition of the *Educator*, delegates at Convention will have heard the many stories of workers who are far less fortunate than those in North America; workers whose daily life is a struggle for life's basic necessities—clean water, clean air, nutritious food, medical care and a decent job. Those stories will inspire all of us to work harder to combat the scourge of corporate globalization.

By extending our hands to exploited workers across the globe, we are helping protect all workers from exploitation, including our own members. By promoting their rights, we promote all workers' rights. And by raising their living standards, we protect all workers' living standards. Our pledge of "Justice on the Job" and "Service to the Community" must know no national boundaries.

Thank you for being a Shop Steward and for all you do for our great union,

In Solidarity,

R. Thomas Buffenbarger

R. Thomas Buffenbarger
International President

