

How to Run an Effective Meeting



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Every one of us has been to a bad meeting before—that’s the meeting where no one showed up, or no one who did show up was acknowledged or participated, the one where the same people talked on and on, or where the meeting started late, accomplished nothing and took forever.

As a steward, you call meetings for the members you represent to talk about grievances, plan actions, give reports and many other reasons. You get to decide whether your next meeting is like the bad one above. You need to OWN your meetings. You can ensure that the meetings you hold are effective and meaningful, will lead to real action, and are making your members want to keep coming.

Why Should the Members Show Up?

Why are meetings close to your contract expiration well-attended, while mid-contract meetings are not? *Members come to meetings when they are about something they care about.* If the meeting is being held just because it’s on a schedule, or if the members have no clear idea of what the meeting is for, why should we expect them to attend?

The best meetings (and the best attended ones) are meetings that have a very clear purpose—and it is up to you to define the purpose. Before the meeting you need to think about, and talk to the members about, why the meeting is important to each of them and what you expect to come out of it. Members are not just deciding whether or not to attend the meeting; they are deciding whether to attend the meeting **INSTEAD** of all of the other things they have going in their busy lives. *If a member does not see the*

purpose—because you have not clearly defined and communicated it—they will not attend.

How Do You Make It Their Meeting?

The best meetings have strong participation and involvement by members from the planning through execution. Too many meetings have the same people talking, all the time. You can decide to limit reports that drone on with unnecessary details. Anything that can be conveyed in a hand-out or by email beforehand should not take up time in the meeting. Encourage discussion and ensure that more members have the space to speak by asking others to report or present ideas on particular agenda items.

Run your meeting *actively*—make eye contact with everyone, acknowledge everyone, ask direct questions that encourage participation and don’t allow anyone to dominate. If the only role for your members is to sit and listen, it will not be *their meeting*—they will not be engaged, they will not keep attending and they will not be involved in the work to come.

What’s the Agenda?

“Meetings without an agenda are like restaurants without a menu.” Susan B. Wilson¹

A meeting with a recycled agenda or without an agenda at all is a sign of poor planning. Agendas give your members a snapshot of what’s to come. Strong agendas have clearly defined sections, time limits, speakers and action/decision points. They ensure that the things that the members care about get highlighted, not buried or delayed until the end. Planning your agenda also lets you prepare in advance for items that may be more tense or controversial. This gives

you the opportunity to gauge—and maybe build—support ahead of time, or have discussions with members who may be upset or aggrieved.

As you run the meeting, agendas give you a tool to keep things moving. Meetings that run without direction always run too long. That is not only disrespectful to your members’ time and lives, but increases the likelihood that they won’t come again.

What Comes Next?

The meeting is over. Now what? Even the best attended, best run meetings can be rendered ineffective by lack of follow-up. After every meeting, a good steward acknowledges every member who attends. They remind all their members, whether or not they attended, why the meeting was important and what steps came out of it. Did you highlight action steps clearly? Does everyone know who is responsible for them, and when the results are due? Reach out to members who have volunteered to do things, and let them know you appreciate their stepping up.

Practice It, Do It, Review It, REPEAT!

When you became a steward you needed to learn how to take on the job in a powerful and effective way. Meetings are no different. You can learn to run effective meetings—if you really take ownership of them. Get ready for the meeting. Run the meeting. Assess the meeting. Ask some people their impressions of the meeting: what worked, what didn’t, who would like to participate in the future. Learn from your mistakes and do it again.

Meetings are a crucially important method for a steward to convey information, to listen to co-workers, to empower and build new leaders and to coordinate action. With forethought, intention and practice you can and will run more effective meetings—and you, your members and your union will be stronger for it.

—David Unger. The writer is a labor educator at the Murphy Labor Institute at the City University of New York. He is a longtime organizer and union representative who teaches new member orientations, organizing skills and steward classes.

The best meetings have a very clear purpose.

¹ Susan B Wilson — *Gourmet Meetings on a Microwave Schedule*

It's Not Just Win or Lose— It's How You Do the Job

Good stewards know that they can't win every grievance. Telling a member that there is nothing more that can be done is never easy and stewards rightly are concerned that the union is going to look bad. *Or will it?*

In the book Building More Effective Unions, Penn State Professor Paul Clark presents the results of research regarding union members' attitudes about their union with respect to grievance handling. While it might seem the opposite of what you would expect, members' attitudes about their union are more strongly influenced by what the union did in processing the grievance than the *outcome* itself.

In other words, many members judge their steward, and the union, not by whether they win their grievance, but mostly on whether the steward did all he or she can do, rather than just going through the motions. When the steward works hard to gather all the facts, ensures that the member's story is fully told, and exerts every reasonable effort to win the grievance, most members will feel the union did its job. They may be disappointed with the end result but that won't be a poor reflection on the steward or the union. Their steward went to bat for them and had their backs!

Of course, there are members who are satisfied only if the union wins their case, regardless of how weak or strong it may be. But the study shows that most members understand that whether they win depends on many factors, many of which are outside the union's control: the facts of the case; how management acts and reacts; and if it goes to arbitration, the judgment of the arbitrator. The

union alone is primarily responsible for how the case is handled and presented. Once members see that the union did all it could reasonably do, most often they will still be satisfied with the union, even if they don't get what they had hoped for from the grievance.

What Is the Lesson for Union Stewards?

First and foremost this research reinforces the importance of following, seriously and deliberately, the basic steps of processing a grievance that we so often read about or learn in training:

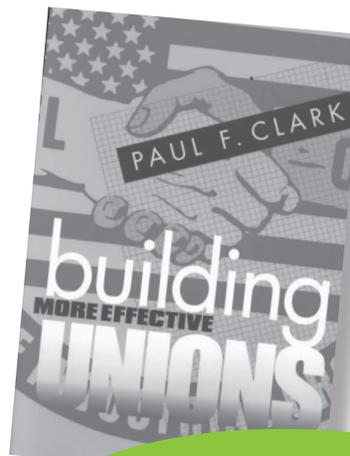
- Meet the time limits.
- Be familiar with the collective bargaining agreement and work every possible angle within it.
- Do a thorough investigation, including instances of past practice.
- Keep good notes and records.
- Confer with other union leaders.
- Brief the member(s) involved prior to any meetings about the grievance at the lower steps about what you will do, what else to expect and how the grievant(s) should act at the meeting.
- Don't sugarcoat the case. Set

reasonable expectations as to where the strengths and weaknesses lie.

- Present the grievance professionally at those lower steps.
- Debrief the grievant(s) after grievance meetings to make sure the grievant(s) understands what happened and what options they have if they are not satisfied.

Second, the research emphasizes the importance of keeping the grievant (and other unit members as appropriate) regularly informed about the status of the grievance. Don't operate behind a curtain,

**The members
need to see you
in action, doing
all you can.**



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where the affected member only finds out what's going on when the final verdict is rendered. The members need to see you in action and feel confident that you are taking your role seriously and doing all you can on their behalf.

When the result of the grievance is in, with or without arbitration, take some time to debrief the case with the grievant. It could be the loss was due to a weakness previously identified. Or, as is often the case, it could have been a conflict in interpretation of contract language that needs to be fixed in the next round of negotiations.

Lastly, it should reassure you that, as a steward, there is a limit to what you can do. Some things are just not within your control. If you lose a case, rather than second guessing yourself or beating yourself up, take comfort in knowing that you did all within your capacity to succeed for the member. If you do your best and the members know it, that in and of itself will help *make your union stronger*. And any time you make your union stronger, you can chalk that up as a win!

—Kitty Conlan. The writer, a labor educator at Penn State and with the North American Building Trades Leadership Academy, is the former education director at the Laborers' International Union of North America (LIUNA).

From the Picket Line to the Classroom: Lessons Learned from the Verizon Strike

Editor's Note: The writer is the chief steward for CWA Local 1101 in New York City. When this article was written in April, 2016, 40,000 members of the Communications Workers of America (CWA) and the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW) were on strike against Verizon from Massachusetts to Virginia.

For nineteen years I've worked at Verizon's East 56th Street central office, across the street from a New York City public school. Every day I walked past the students, never giving them a second thought. I assumed they felt the same towards me. They walked past me with textbooks and backpacks and I walked past with grievances and handbills.

On the second day of our strike the principal came down to speak to the picketers. She said that the students were

taking exams and asked us if we could keep the noise down. She understood why we were there and supported our strike but was acting in the best interest of her children. We told her we would do our best under the circumstances.

Later that day she brought down letters of support from the students and had one of the classes join the picket line. The students asked our members why we were on strike and what we were protesting. After the questions and answers were done they crossed the street back to the school chanting, "CWA!!!" In the following days the students in the school came by the picket line to show their support with fists raised and kind words.

Yesterday one of the teachers came down and asked if we could address a

senior economics class which was starting a unit on labor. We were supposed to talk to one class but were so well received we spent the whole day there, visiting six different classes discussing why we were on strike and what we hoped to gain.

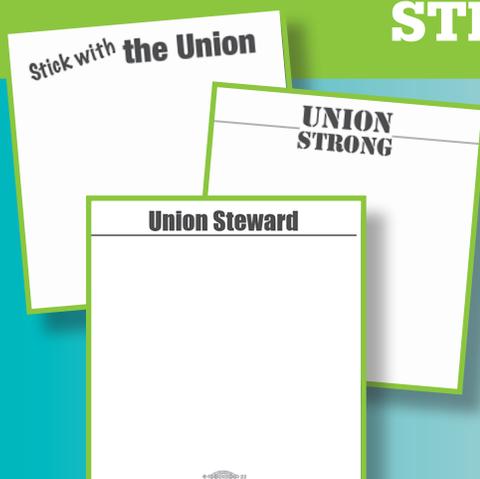
Along with fellow Chief Steward John Henry and Stewards Tommy Carpenter and Alex Ortiz, we spent the whole day going over CWA history and the events that led up to our strike. The students were extremely interested and asked great questions. By the end of the day there was a buzz going around the school that the guys with the bullhorns were teaching a class. One of the teachers said a student described the discussion as "awesome."

I walked into that school assuming the students didn't care about what was going on outside their windows. I assumed they were just trying to get a break from the guy with the bullhorn by getting me into a classroom and off the picket line. We taught them about our history and our struggle. But the truth is those students taught me more than I could have taught them. I learned today's youth does care about what's going on around them and that many of these kids come from middle-income families with parents in unions, some even on strike with us. I learned that they're concerned with the state of labor and the future of this country. Our future seemed a little brighter, with young men and women like those I met today becoming the leaders of tomorrow. Thanks for the lesson.

—Keith Hogarty. The writer is Chief Steward at CWA Local 1101. Originally published on the CWA Local 1101 website in April 2016. Reprinted with permission from CWA Local 1101 and the author.

Today's youth care about what's going on around them.

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Handling Grievances: More Like Mother Jones, Less Like Perry Mason

Perhaps it happens in your workplace: Management avoids taking responsibility when they know they are wrong. They drag the process out and treat group problems as personal, individual gripes, hoping the workers won't unite and will eventually drop the issue.

When the grievance procedure becomes a web of rules and delays, members start to lose faith in the process. That's why it's important to handle grievances less like the fictional TV lawyer Perry Mason and more like the legendary union hell-raiser Mother Jones.

Not a Third Party Approach

Perry Mason wasn't concerned with building unions—just with winning his case. He carefully planned out his case and got

all the facts, something stewards should always do as well. But he won every case with clever cross-examination and startling new evidence at the last minute. That made great TV but isn't realistic. And it's not how stewards are likely to win grievances.

Sometimes stewards think that since management is being "lawyerly" they should do the same. Lawyers focus on what happens at hearings without involving members in supporting grievances. This encourages workers to view the union as a "third party" that comes in to solve problems.

Doing a thorough investigation, writing the grievance properly and meeting all deadlines without involving members doesn't build the union and it's often not enough to win. That's where Mother Jones comes in.

"The first thing is to raise hell, says I. That's always the first thing to do when you're faced with an injustice and you feel powerless. That's what I do in my fight for the working class."

—Mary Harris "Mother" Jones

Activist Approach

Mary Harris Jones (1837-1930), an Irish immigrant, organized workers in the coal, textile and railroad industries. Among the campaigns she led was the remarkable 1903 Children's March against child labor, where she mobilized people, gained national attention, won public sympathy and

stigmatized her opponents. She focused on identifiable targets, like Wall Street and then-U.S. president Theodore Roosevelt.

Mother Jones used direct action to solve workers' problems that were widespread, deeply ingrained and resistant to negotiated settlement; workers across the nation were inspired to demand, and win, improved conditions. When a campaign using direct action succeeds, all workers feel it is their victory. If it loses, workers learn important lessons they can use to fight another day.

Perry Mason's Approach vs. Mother Jones's Approach

Consider these two different approaches, in the box at left, for tackling injustices at work – Perry Mason's focus only on the grievance hearing and fancy tactics or Mother Jones's looking at the whole situation and using the members' involvement and power to get resolutions.

—Steve Thornton. The writer is a retired union organizer who writes for ShoeleatherHistoryProject.com.

PERRY MASON Approach:	MOTHER JONES Approach:
A worker has a problem so the steward takes the case for that individual—If the contract isn't violated the steward discourages filing a grievance or taking other action.	The steward emphasizes how the problem, whether a contract violation or not, could affect everyone and with other members evaluates using the grievance procedure and other ways to get a resolution.
The steward, like a lawyer, handles the case alone, relying on cleverness and relationships with management.	The steward involves the grievant in every step of the way, giving the grievant assignments and involving other stewards and co-workers.
If the workers lose the grievance, they blame the steward or "the union," not the employer. If they win they hail the steward as a "hero" until the next problem arises (if that long).	Win or lose, if the steward has successfully involved the grievant and co-workers, everyone saw and heard how management acted and understands the result. The steward involves members in developing new plans to build power to challenge the boss face to face.
The steward gets angry at the workers for being ungrateful.	The steward, together with the workers, analyzes what went wrong and right with their plan and learns how to do better the next time.
The resentment and frustration within the union membership let management take advantage of the lack of unity to get away with even more injustices.	A strong union membership constantly challenges bad employer decisions, even if some battles are lost. The boss thinks twice before taking a wrong step because he knows the workers will be hot on his trail every time.

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Dear Brothers and Sisters,

Maybe you've noticed — there's something remarkable going on right now.

Working people are going toe-to-toe with the biggest and most powerful corporations in the world, and right now, we're winning. Thanks to IAM members like yourself and millions of others, the Trans-Pacific Partnership, or TPP, has become a household name with a bad reputation.

And for good reason: TPP, if it ever hits North American shores, would make it even easier to "free trade" our jobs overseas for a quick corporate buck. TPP will encourage companies to take their chances on cheap, unprotected labor abroad and make it even harder to organize new union members at home. Instead of changing the rules, TPP will rig the game further against us.

Don't just take it from me: A government report historically used to sell bad trade deals predicted TPP would be disastrous across wide swaths of our economy. It's getting tough for the corporate CEOs and their lawyers to explain why another secretly-negotiated trade scheme is good for anyone, but you better believe they're still trying.

We need to keep up our pressure.

Demand your representatives in Congress or Parliament denounce TPP as the jobs destroyer it is. Then, have a conversation with your IAM Sisters and Brothers, family and friends about how we can unite to beat this attack on all working people.

When we turn out and speak up, we win.

In Solidarity,

Bob Martinez, Jr.
International President





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