

II: THE ROLES OF THE STEWARD

AFSCME members bring different skills, abilities, strengths and experiences to the job of union steward. Some stewards are terrific organizers while others are great at motivating people. Some enjoy representing members in the grievance procedure and others eagerly tackle on-the-job issues by developing new tactics and strategies. With their energy, enthusiasm and commitment, AFSCME stewards play a key role in creating a vigorous local union.

The Steward as Leader

Leadership can be defined as **the ability to motivate a group of people to act in pursuit of its common interests and goals.**

AFSCME members look to the steward as a leader in the workplace. They turn to the steward when they are seeking information or when they need some help in solving a problem. To be a leader, the steward must understand the diversity of the union's membership — cultural, racial, gender, sexual orientation, age differences — and promote unity to put a stop to management attempts to divide workers.

As a steward, you must have **credibility** (defined simply as being “worthy of belief or trust”) with union members, co-workers, and the managers and supervisors with whom you attempt to resolve workplace issues and problems. Usually, credibility isn't easily granted — it must be earned over time.

You must be **able to listen** to the problems, concerns and issues of members and co-workers. By identifying workplace problems, stewards can engage members in developing solutions. Listening is a skill that must be developed and practiced.

Stewards must be **able to motivate** members to take action on workplace concerns and problems. Stewards who try to “do it all” become overburdened, overwhelmed and stressed out. Stewards who do it all are not involving other members in the union. High member participation is a sign of a strong union.



Bright Ideas ***Doing What it Takes to be a Leader***

Gain Credibility

- Be honest with members, co-workers and managers; a steward who bluffs, misleads or skirts the truth won't remain credible for very long.
- Be reliable. If you are asked a question and you don't know the answer, say "I don't know" — then get the information and get back to the person as soon as possible. When you say you are going to do something, follow through.
- Be knowledgeable about the contract, the work rules and policies, co-workers in your area, supervisors and managers, issues impacting the workers, etc.
- Be supportive. When co-workers approach you with their concerns and complaints, offer understanding, encouragement and help or guidance in addressing their problems.
- Be committed to the labor movement and the goals of AFSCME — gaining respect, dignity and fair treatment on the job, and providing a voice in determining working conditions.

Listen

- Pay attention to what the member, non-member or manager is saying.
- Show interest in the issue, problem or complaint that is being described; maintain eye contact.
- Concentrate and don't fake attention or allow yourself to be distracted.
- Don't interrupt. It's impossible to listen when you are also talking.
- Ask questions if you are unclear or confused or don't understand something the person is saying.

Motivate members

- Lead by example.
- Build relationships of trust and solidarity over time, so that you have a solid foundation when you ask people to do a specific task or take part in an activity.
- Talk to members one on one — it's more effective, for example, than asking for volunteers at a group meeting.
- Assign people specific, clearly defined tasks; it's easier to get volunteers to do a small part of a project than to take on the entire project.
- Establish when the task will begin and when the task will end.
- Remember that people become active because they are passionate or angry about problems on the job. Challenge them to do something about those problems by getting involved.

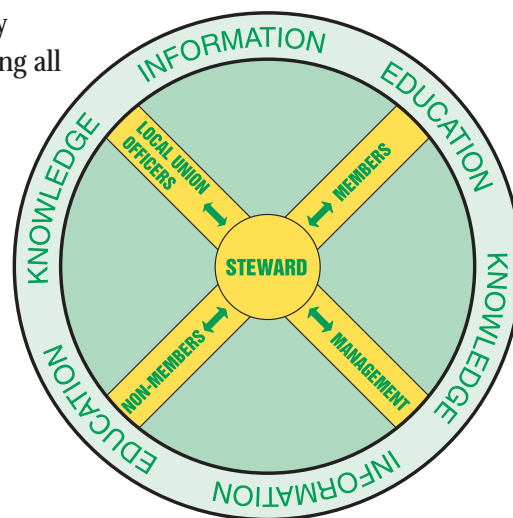
The Steward as Communicator

The steward is the hub of a communications wheel. Information is constantly transmitting back and forth along all the spokes of this wheel.

One-on-One

The most effective way to communicate with co-workers is face-to-face or one-on-one. This type of communication has several advantages over any other method. By communicating one-on-one, stewards can:

- “Put a face” on the union.
- Increase union visibility.
- Build relationships with union members.
- Gain immediate feedback on issues.
- Learn about a worker's concerns and problems.
- Directly ask the member to be involved in some specific way (examples: come to a meeting, be on a committee, sign a petition, wear a button, hand out leaflets, etc.).



A strong union depends on a constant information flow. Union officers, stewards and active members are always making decisions on how to address problems and on actions needed to create a better workplace. The greater the quantity and quality of information, the better those decisions will be.

First and foremost, stewards should know their contract or work rules. But just as important, stewards should know the issues and problems affecting members, and all about the union. A big part of communication is your ability to share knowledge and information in a way that helps workers understand how and why issues affect them. Informed and educated members become active members.

What the Steward Should Know and Teach

- **Workplace Issues and How They Affect Employees.** Stay informed on issues affecting AFSCME members by developing relationships with your co-workers, creating a MAT (Member Action Team) structure (see Page 37), and listening to employee concerns. You can also keep informed about issues affecting AFSCME membership across the country by reading union publications and by accessing the AFSCME Web site (www.afscme.org) on the Internet. Examples of such issues are privatization and contracting out, labor economics, and political and legislative issues. Share important information with co-workers through the MAT structure.
- **The Contract** (or other work rules in places where the union has not yet won collective bargaining rights and negotiated a contract). A contract contains the wages, hours and working conditions agreed to by the union and management. It is the primary source of employee rights on the job.
- **Work Rules.** These may be found in such documents as civil service rules, merit system rules, administrative codes or thick policy and procedure manuals devised by management. Get to know them so you can ensure that management is applying them fairly and equitably.
- **Union Structure.** Know the names of the local's officers, stewards and MAT leaders; any committees in the local and the names of committee chairs; the date, time and place of membership meetings; the phone number of the local union office (if there is one); member benefits; and services provided by the local, council and international union.
- **Union Direction and Goals.** Be familiar with the union's **objectives** (like stopping privatization, passing legislation that helps workers, organizing new members, etc.); the union's **values** (protecting a

worker's right to respect and fair treatment on the job); and the union's **mission** (gaining new members, increasing on-the-job rights and protections, and improving wages and working conditions).

The Steward as Representative

The steward represents employees in the formal grievance procedure (see Section III for comprehensive information on handling grievances).

In addition, the steward represents workers in several other ways, including:

- Informal problem-solving efforts and discussions with management.
- Interactions with local officers, giving voice to employee views and concerns.

On the flip side, the steward represents local leaders when passing union-related information on to the membership.

The Steward as Organizer

Stewards are the most visible union presence in the workplace. You come into contact with co-workers every day you are on the job. Because of this fact, the steward is in an ideal position to carry out the most important function of any union activist: being a union organizer.

Stewards can do this in two ways. First, you can activate and mobilize union members on workplace issues that affect them. And second, you can sign up and activate new members.

Mobilizing Members

Different problems arise on the job almost every day. The supervisor is treating workers unfairly. Management is ignoring or misinterpreting the contract. The administrator is not doing what he promised, or the administrator is doing exactly what he said he wouldn't do. To address most workplace problems, there are usually several approaches and options available.

- The **Grievance Procedure** is the formal problem-solving process found in the contract, or work rules if there is no contract (see Section III). But the grievance procedure has several drawbacks: Many problems are not covered by contract language. It takes time to process a grievance and "justice delayed is justice denied." A grievance often involves only one steward and one worker, and management has to deal with only those two people. And where do unions find their strength? In numbers! So, stewards should always think about how to involve members to address on-the-job problems.

- **Informal discussions** with management can sometimes resolve workplace problems. The worker's representative — the steward — could do this. Better yet, a group of workers — with their steward — could meet with the manager. Strength in numbers! This could be done before filing a grievance (when there may be a better chance to solve the problem). Or, it could be done instead of filing a grievance.
- **Mobilizing members** to solve workplace problems is the best way to build union strength and power in the workplace. This approach takes advantage of the source of the union's strength — the members! To carry out successful workplace actions, stewards should:
 - ◆ Plan tactics and strategies **together** with members; actions can be simple or elaborate — everything from petitions to button days to leaflets to delegations to meet with management.
 - ◆ **Involve** as many workers as possible in planning and carrying out actions.
 - ◆ **Build support** by talking with workers one on one.
 - ◆ Keep co-workers **informed** so the group can make decisions together.
 - ◆ **Publicize** your victories.

For help with organizing activities on job-related problems, see the following sections of this handbook:

Member Action Teams, Pages 37-38

Planning a Strategic Campaign, Appendix E, Pages 62-63

Rules of Tactics, Appendix F, Page 64



Bright Ideas ***Building Union Strength Around Workplace Issues***

To be a good workplace issue to mobilize and activate members, the issue should:

- Be widely felt — affects a large number of people.
- Be deeply felt — workers want to do something about the issue.
- Be winnable — the members should believe there is a good chance of winning, or that they have a good strategy to win.
- Be easy to understand.
- Be non-divisive — avoid issues that divide the membership and those that might divide us from the public we serve.

- Build leadership and ownership — there should be many ways for members to be involved.
- Give members a sense of their power — by developing and carrying out a successful strategy.
- Have a clear time frame — ideally, a short time frame for resolution.
- Be worthwhile and result in real improvement in members' lives.
- Be consistent with the union's values.
- Alter the power relationship — involving members changes the "balance of power" in the workplace.

An Example of Using a Problem to Build Strength

Scenario: During the summer months the central air-conditioning system in a city building ran continuously. Employees would come in from the summer heat to a building that was downright chilly. Workers were not comfortable. Many were having to use sick leave. The steward filed a grievance but nothing happened. The department head said it was beyond his control to fix.

Taking Action: Anger and frustration mounted so the steward gathered employees and together they came up with a plan. First, they circulated a petition demanding the air conditioning be fixed. The steward and three other union members presented the petition to the department head; a copy was sent to the city manager.

Next, the employees had a small sign made up that they photocopied and they all posted by their desks, so members of the public could see. The sign said: "We're not giving you the cold shoulder, the building is."

The employees talked about what else they could do. They considered an informational picket line but decided they wanted to do some other action first so everyone would participate. One member said she knew how to get a supply of green earmuffs. The earmuffs were obtained and for three consecutive days all the employees wore them while working. At the same time, the steward wrote a letter to the city manager, demanding a meeting to discuss the air conditioning. The steward had all employees in the department sign the letter. A representative committee delivered the letter in person to the city manager's office.

The city manager did not meet with the employees. Instead, over the weekend, the air conditioning system was repaired.

The following weekend the employees had a party to celebrate and sing a chorus or two of *Solidarity Forever* (lyrics are found in Appendix G, Page 65).

Signing Up and Activating New Members

Reach Out to New Employees. In almost every instance, the first union activist a new employee sees is the steward. Right away you have a golden opportunity to “organize” the new worker — that is, ask the employee to sign a membership card, join the union and become involved. Place a high priority on signing up new members, whether the employee is new on the job, or the worker has been around for years but — for whatever reason — hasn’t yet joined the union.



Bright Ideas ***Ask Them to Join***

In surveys, the Number One reason workers give for not joining a union is “No one ever asked me.” That problem is easy to fix — go out and ask co-workers to join our union.

Don’t Forget Agency Fee (or “Fair Share”) Payers. In many places the union has negotiated a contract provision that workers who don’t join the union are still required to pay an agency fee (usually a percentage of or equivalent to union dues). Don’t forget these people or take the attitude of “well, we’re getting their money so it doesn’t matter if they become members.” Every worker in the bargaining unit is a potential member, a potential resource, a potential talent and a potential union activist.



Bright Ideas ***Organizing New Members***

- Be a visible union presence on the job. A good first step is to wear your steward button at work every day.
- Greet new employees the first day on the job.
- Provide a “welcome kit” of union materials (see Appendix B, Page 58).
- Talk about the importance of being a member of the union and answer any questions the employee has about the union or about the job.

- Offer a membership card and ask the employee to sign and join the union.
- After signing up new members, keep in touch and ask them to participate in union activities and join union committees.
- Know the work area you represent — who's in the union, who's not, where they work, what shift, etc.
- Talk regularly with members and non-members — get to know them.
- Provide union literature (e.g., newsletters) and materials about specific topics (e.g., health and safety, child care issues, privatization, etc.) so they can see union efforts on issues that affect them.
- On workplace issues that affect all employees, ask non-members to participate and become part of the solution.

