

Canada

**JAM**  
E D U C A T O R

Update for Stewards

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# Dealing with Workplace Rumours



# Dealing with Workplace Rumours

**R**umours in the workplace can be a dangerous thing. They can weaken the union's position at the bargaining table, diminish solidarity among your co-workers, and generally make your job as a union steward harder. While you'll never be able to completely rid your workplace of rumours, you can minimize the damage by viewing them as opportunities to educate and unify your members.

Whether they're circulating around contract negotiations, grievances, workplace safety, or leadership, rumours are an indication of the members' concern around a particular issue, so it's a good idea to pay attention to them and respond to them as quickly and truthfully as you can. This is going to require some nimble action on your part, because rumours can pop up at any time, and you can't schedule them as you do your other tasks. To prepare for the unexpected, you should have a system in place for responding to rumours as they arise.

## Keep Yourself Informed

The best thing you can do to combat untrue stories at work is, of course, to keep yourself informed. You should always know what your union is doing—and why—so you can answer any questions your members may have.

False stories that circulate around contract negotiations can be especially damaging. Managers have been known to spread incorrect information to undermine the union's position. Sometimes a disgruntled member is the source of the problem. Very often, the rumour is a simple misunderstanding of the facts. Regardless of why a rumour started, you're the one who needs to stop it. Even though you may not

be able to discuss the specifics of the give-and-take going on at the bargaining table, you can respond to the rumours by reminding the members of what your overall goals are during negotiations and dispelling those concerns that are blatantly untrue.



**The best thing you can do to combat untrue stories is to keep yourself informed.**

You should talk to union officers or the Bargaining Committee to be clear about what you should or should not divulge about negotiations. Remember that whatever you tell the members is likely to find its way to management.

Rumours can also spread rapidly after grievance settlements are announced. Each grievance has its own issues and nuances that members might not fully understand. Some members may gripe about a perceived unfair settlement or, just as likely, a settlement that appears to favour one member. While a grievance must be treated with some confidentiality, every grievance settlement has an effect on the workplace and should be discussed in general terms. For instance, if management short-changed a worker's hours, or if a worker was disciplined when there was no contract violation, you should let

people know to be on the lookout for similar scenarios in the future.

## Rumours Can Spread Far and Wide

Plant closings, layoffs, and company expansions are a source of rumours that will spread not only among union members but throughout the larger community. Stories about the future of your plant may appear in the local newspapers or television news before the union gets the word out. Journalists can get union-related news wrong, or report the facts in a way that causes anxiety for members of your bargaining unit.

When the local media misreport anything about layoffs, buyouts, or plant closings, it's up to your union leadership to ask the news outlet for a correction, but it's your job to make sure your members have the facts as soon as possible. In these situations, individual members have to make crucial decisions about their jobs and their lives, and they need to get the facts from you, not just from the local news. As with any other union-related rumour, correct misinformation as soon as possible, in as many places as possible—in person, via shop fliers, the union's web site, and even your Facebook page. (If you get comments that re-introduce false stories, correct that commenter and then delete their comment.)

## Private Matters? Not Your Business

Rumours involving members and their relationships or other personal information can be the toughest to deal with because they're rarely considered union business. Being aware of stories spreading among members may help you to deal with some workplace issues, but be careful not to get caught up in private matters. The spreading of rumours about anyone's personal business on the Internet should not be tolerated on a Facebook page or any other online site that you control.

No matter how well you deal with rumours, they will occur again, but don't let that discourage you. Just make sure your members know they can always count on you to set the record straight.

—John Huber. The writer is a General Motors retiree and a former president of UAW Local 1097.

# Getting People To Work Together



**L**et's say a union committee you are on is having difficulty working together, or certain members never seem to “get” where other members are coming from. Or perhaps when you're doing community outreach you find it difficult to really connect and communicate with potential supporters.

There may be many reasons for these situations, including the past experiences individuals have had with one another, people's differing needs or priorities, or a lack of clarity about the task and what is expected.

Often the obstacle is the different customs, preferences and styles that reflect the individual backgrounds and cultures of members, allies and others. As our society, including our workplaces and unions, becomes more diverse, learning how to work with everyone—and getting them to work with each other—can be complicated, but is absolutely essential.

There are a variety of areas where differences in culture and style might come into play; recognizing them will help stewards in their interactions with members, community groups, and others who have grown up in environments different from their own. Read on for some examples!

## Directness and Personal Space

A while ago I was in Mexico for an extended visit, where I learned that it's considered quite rude to ask a stranger a question (like how to find the bus station) without first taking time to say “Buenos dias.” When I'm in New York City, I find most people appreciate a stranger taking as little time as possible, getting right to the question without small talk.

Likewise, people differ in how they feel about how close a person should get when talking to them. One person's attempt at showing friendship and trust by huddling close may cause the others to feel their personal space is being invaded.

## Decision Making

Some people are “facts and figures” kinds of people. When faced with an issue they go on the Internet to find statistics and suggested solutions. Others put more importance on their “gut feelings” about an issue and look at the experience of others facing similar situations. Both kinds of information need to be considered for good problem solving and decision making, but people working together on a problem may butt heads over this unless they are respectful of others' styles and find room for all approaches.

## Using Words Differently

Have you ever noticed that not everyone means the same thing when they say, “That *never* happens” or “I'll be there *soon*,” or “Yes, that happens *sometimes*.” In a classroom exercise, students rated what they mean when they use words like *never*, *soon* and *sometimes*. Turns out that when some people say “It *never* happens,” what they mean is it happens zero times; others mean that it happens 30 percent of the time!

The wide range of meanings people assign to words like these demonstrates that we should be precise and be comfortable asking for clarification.

**Be comfortable asking for clarification.**

## Working with Others

Some people want to get right to work on a task and figure they'll get to know their workmates as they go along. Others may only be comfortable starting on the task after spending time getting to know those they'll be working with. Conflicts and misunderstandings can occur if these two types fail to recognize their different styles and agree to reach an understanding on how to proceed.

## Revealing Feelings and Opinions

Some people readily share their feelings or opinions with others, even those they just met. Others are more reserved, revealing themselves slowly, only when they feel comfortable with the group or if asked directly. If you are in a group discussion and some people are remaining silent, don't assume you know what their silence means. Work on creating an atmosphere where everyone has an opportunity to give their input. That might mean, for example, going around the room and asking everyone to contribute rather than just relying on raised hands.

## Communications Technology

This often, but not always, corresponds with generational differences. Younger members may prefer getting information about the union electronically (texts, e-mail, Tweets, and so on) while others like having a piece of paper to read or to talk on the phone. An effective steward uses whatever methods work to reach and include everyone. Bear in mind, too, that as technologies become more common the behaviours that are considered acceptable will vary. For example, many younger people don't consider it rude to text during meetings while older people may get angry, thinking it's a sign of inattention or indifference. Plan accordingly!

It's not realistic to think you can bridge all cultural and style gaps effortlessly just by reading a few helpful tips. But good listening and awareness skills, along with lots of practice, can help you avoid conflict, misunderstandings and aggravations.

—Ken Margolies. The writer is a senior associate of the Worker Institute at Cornell University's School of Industrial and Labour Relations.

# Stewards and Negotiations

**O**ne important role of a union steward is to increase membership participation in union activities. To this end, contract negotiation time is almost magical—members who have not attended a local meeting in years suddenly are sitting in the front row. Co-workers who were “too busy” to read newsletters or leaflets or e-mails about union activities suddenly need extra copies and have all kinds of questions. When you could usually have a local union meeting in a phone booth, as the contract expiration approaches, you need to rent a stadium.

How can a steward help make contract negotiations successful?

In the first place, everyone should agree on two key goals: a short-term goal of a better contract with no takeaways and a long-term goal of a stronger union. A union today that comes out of negotiations stronger than it went in can claim a significant achievement that will be felt for years and that can also be the basis for new organizing campaigns.

## Bargaining Surveys

Long before the two sides actually sit at the bargaining table, stewards can prepare the membership by circulating bargaining surveys prepared by the union. These sheets ask the membership to list priorities for the new contract and can help guide the negotiating committee. The activity of passing out—and retrieving—the surveys gives stewards the opportunity to speak with every member and to begin to build membership confidence and morale.

More important than a simple listing of priorities, these surveys signal the beginning of an important event and a dramatic change in the atmosphere at work. The stewards should be preaching “No more business as usual,” emphasizing the urgency of membership support for the new contract.

As you speak with your co-workers, stress that negotiations are not a TV show

for the members to sit back and watch. Negotiations have to involve *every member* and each must be ready to refocus a commitment of time and energy while the negotiations are going on.

As the negotiations start, an important function of the steward system is to quickly and accurately distribute information about the talks, especially if the meetings are held away from the worksite.

## A Blackout on Talks?

One of the major strategic decisions that a local has to make is the method of conducting negotiations. Often management will “suggest” a blackout on information as part of the negotiating ground rules, arguing that fewer people knowing about issues of contention will make resolving them easier. While every union and every negotiation is unique, and a blackout might make sense in special situations, there is powerful evidence to suggest that the more those members know about negotiations, the stronger and more successful the union will be.

In the first place, the more members who are aware of and involved in what’s going on, the more leverage the union will have. An informed membership is a powerful membership, a fact management clearly recognizes when it insists on total secrecy. There will certainly be disagreements among the members—over bargaining priorities, over bargaining strategy, over details of the settlement (or strike), but these disputes are healthy for a local union, so long as all members keep their eyes on the prize of an outstanding contract and a stronger union.

Second, management is notorious for leaking “information” to discredit the union and to disrupt the bargaining process. If the union does not have a better network through the steward system, management’s version of negotiations will

prevail. This distorted flow of “information” can undermine the credibility of the union negotiators and spread dissension among the members. Stewards who are well informed about the issues and the strategy provide the counter-attack, giving invaluable support to the negotiating committee by emphasizing priorities and resolving disagreements.

Set up sophisticated methods for distributing information. Just passing out leaflets isn’t enough, especially in workplaces with many shifts or divisions. Stewards can set up e-mail lists, or collect cell phone numbers, or even use Instant Messaging. The local can establish a website with a blog for membership comments.

## Techniques for Showing Support

Passing along information is simply a prelude to organizing the members for active and visible support for the union’s positions. There are some easy ways to show support: wearing buttons, signing petitions and holding lunchtime meetings are common tactics. They demonstrate to the boss that “there are more of us than there are of you.” Expanding awareness and support of the negotiations into the community, or to other workplaces of the employer, requires activity from every member. A few dedicated stewards and officers simply cannot cover all the areas. Every steward in every department, passing out buttons or petitions, expands the activity of the union.

If the intensity of negotiations picks up, stewards have to step up the involvement of the members. Informational picketing, special meetings or leaflet distributions all require a sacrifice of time and energy by the members, so the stewards have to keep prodding those who are reluctant or fearful. Keep stressing that the negotiations require total membership commitment. Management always measures membership participation as one sign of union strength, so a steward’s efforts at improving turnout can only help the negotiations.

If all goes well, then the steward’s last responsibility—for these negotiations, at least—is planning the victory party.

**An important function is to accurately distribute information.**

# Stewards as “Weingarten Witnesses”

**E**very steward knows that workers called to meet with the boss about something that could result in discipline should say they want a union representative to be there: Workers have that right under the Weingarten rule. But there’s a good reason to have a steward present even if the worker is positive he or she has done nothing wrong, and that’s something that could best be described as relationship building—with co-workers, even with the boss.

In other words, Weingarten rights are useful in a pre-emptive manner for the union, for workers, and even for management. Consider this scenario.

## Being “Innocent” Isn’t Enough

Jim is a veteran union electrician employed at a local university. He is very skilled at his craft and has never been in trouble. But he is also stubborn and a little naive. When his manager approaches Jim on a Monday afternoon asking that he report to his office for an investigatory interview, Jim does not ask for a steward. He knows he’s done nothing wrong and believes that his unblemished work record and lengthy experience attest to his conscientiousness as an employee and that the manager will realize that Jim’s conduct is above reproach.

So Jim goes, alone, to the meeting in the manager’s office. His boss questions him about the recent disappearance of some electrical equipment, just discovered over the weekend. Jim accounts for his whereabouts and leaves the meeting 20 minutes later.

The investigation continues; the next day Jim shakes his head in dismay when he learns that two of his co-workers were found responsible and suspended without pay for a month. They each file a grievance.

Upon their return from suspension, the co-workers learn that when Jim was interviewed by the manager he was alone, without representation. “There can be only one reason for Jim not wanting the rep in the room for the interview,” they surmised. “He must have said we did it!” It didn’t take long for all the blue-collar workers on campus to hear that Jim was a fink who couldn’t be trusted.

## Unintended Consequences

It didn’t matter that Jim’s conversation with the manager was harmless: His co-workers were convinced that he played a part in their being accused of misconduct and their ensuing suspension. For many months Jim was shunned by his co-workers—betrayal of a co-worker to management, regardless of whether or not a person’s guilty of misconduct, was a breach of an unwritten code.

Had Jim ignored his stubborn impulses and asked for a steward, he could not have been blamed for their discipline because the steward, as a witness, would have been able to verify what took place in the meeting.

A good steward makes sure that the workers he or she represents know to always invoke their right to representation (“Weingarten” rights or, in Canada, “Duty to Fair Representation” rights) even if they have done nothing wrong, because failing to do so leaves them without a witness to verify what was said. Just as important, as in Jim’s case, is having a witness to verify what was *not* said. This tale also highlights another important fact; union members should keep in mind that

insisting on having representation is not only in their own best interests, but also in the best interests of their co-workers.

## Help Your Members Understand

Many managers can adopt an obnoxious attitude if a worker invokes ‘Weingarten’ rights. The fact that it is up to the employee to request representation fuels this sentiment, as though exercising such a right were an admission of guilt. It is up to the union steward to be sure that all members of the bargaining unit know the importance of having a representative in the room during an investigatory interview even if, like Jim, they’ve done nothing wrong and believe they can handle it alone.

In some cases, a steward might have a conversation with the managers in their area and request that they inform employees about their right to be represented whenever an investigatory interview will be undertaken. Having a third party in these meetings protects the worker, but it also protects the manager from being accused of making inappropriate or inflammatory remarks.

When all parties in the workplace commit to making a general practice of urging employees to exercise their Weingarten rights, costly litigation stemming from alleged Weingarten violations

## Read Aloud if Facing Possible Discipline

“If the discussion I am being asked to enter could in any way lead to my discipline or termination or impact my personal working conditions, I ask that a union steward, representative or other officer be present. Unless I have this union representation I respectfully choose not to participate in this discussion.”

*(This is my right under a Supreme Court decision called Weingarten)*

can be avoided and relationships with and between management, the workforce and the union can be improved. This is a great reward for simply encouraging, at the onset of a meeting, that a union representative be present at an investigatory interview with management.

—Mark Torres. The writer is a labour law attorney and former Teamster shop steward.

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OFFICE OF THE INTERNATIONAL PRESIDENT

Dear IAM Shop Steward,

You may have heard the old saying: Elections matter, and if you ever doubted it just look at the aftermath of the 2014 midterm elections in the United States. Anti-labor forces took control of the U.S. Senate, increased their majority in the U.S. House and gained control of even more state legislatures and governorships. In short order, there has been an avalanche of corporate-backed legislation, including an explosion of Right-to-Work (for less) laws.

In Canada, our members have endured almost 10 years of Conservative Party rule with similar attacks on working families and labor as in the United States.

Corporate-backed politicians in both countries are going after labor, civil rights and any other groups that stick up for working families. In the U.S., even as thousands of people gathered in Selma, Alabama to mark the 50th Anniversary of Bloody Sunday and the resulting passage of the Voting Rights Act, states are passing voter suppression bills that are nothing less than modern-day Jim Crow laws.

But we are not standing still. In Canada, IAM members are mobilizing to replace the anti-worker Harper government in federal elections in October 2015. In the U.S., IAM members were out in force in March as part of labor lobby day to educate Senators and Representatives about the dangers of Fast Track Trade Authority and the push to pass the NAFTA-like Trans-Pacific Partnership trade deal.

And in West Virginia, New Mexico, New Hampshire, Maine, Montana and Kentucky, IAM members helped stall attempts to pass Right-to-Work (for less) laws, but the fight is just starting. Powerful corporate interests are coordinating a well-financed campaign to pass local laws to build pressure for a national Right-to-Work (for less) law that would devastate unions and American working families.

There are many challenges ahead in 2015, but if we keep in mind the spirit and activism of the civil rights movement, we can succeed against seemingly insurmountable odds and make life better for working families in North America and across the world.

In Solidarity,

R. Thomas Buffenbarger  
International President

