

# Member Apathy? No. Look Closer!

Apathetic?

They  
don't need me

I feel  
powerless

I might be  
embarrassed

STEWARD



# Member Apathy: Look Harder

**I**t's the number one problem stewards face: getting co-workers involved. Most likely you've heard stewards make the same complaint: "They're just too apathetic!"

Believe it or not, there is no such thing as member apathy. What is often seen as apathy is usually something else. Here are three common reasons, often mistaken for apathy, why members don't join in actions with their brothers and sisters.

■ *Feeling Powerless.* Members refuse to sign a petition on an important workplace issue. Why? Don't they care? More likely it means they don't believe it will make a difference.

TRY THIS: Don't argue. Give examples of how petitions have been the first step in past successful mobilizations. (This is why it's important to keep a record of successful group actions in your area or another part of your union.) Talk about the next steps you have in mind to build on the petition and eventually win on the issue.

■ *Feeling Embarrassed.* Members won't come to a meeting with management to show their support for an important matter even though they agree with the union's goal on the issue. They may have never done something like that and fear they won't know what to do so would look dumb, or get put on the spot by management and not know how to respond. They may worry that friends or family will question why they participated and they wouldn't be prepared to explain their presence.

TRY THIS: Find another member who can explain in more detail what is involved and how he or she overcame initial fears. The active member can explain how joining actions led to increased confidence and positive relationships with co-workers. He or she can also describe the fun of seeing management's reaction as well as the reward of feeling powerful.

■ *Thinking They Won't Be Missed.* If members told you before an event that they will "absolutely" be there and then they didn't show, it's easy to get annoyed and simply avoid the subject when you next see them, especially if this has happened before.

TRY THIS: Don't ignore the no-shows. Right after the event, approach them and ask why they didn't attend. Keep a positive attitude and listen to their reasons. Your co-workers will realize that you cared about their attendance, and that their broken promise was noticed.

## Reacting to Your Approach

It's possible that changing your own approach, expectations and assumptions could yield better results, or at least reduce your frustration. Think about whether the following might apply to you.

■ *Asking Impersonally.* You put up a notice on the bulletin board or send out an email and hope members will attend, but nobody shows.

TRY THIS: Talk face-to-face. Then use "organizers' math," meaning that if you want five people to attend, talk to 20. Ten might say "no." Ten might say "yes." Half of the "yes" responders will show up.

■ *Thinking of it as a Favor.* Too many stewards hesitate to ask a co-worker to get involved because they think they are begging for a favor.

TRY THIS: It's not about you! Remind yourself that what you are asking members to do benefits them and all the members involved. Ask a member to do something specific. Then enthusiastically explain how, together, you will achieve something important.

■ *Mistaking a "Maybe" for a "Yes."* You approach 20 people and ask them to attend a rally. When ten say "maybe" you move on and expect to see them. Five say "yes." Only two show up.

TRY THIS: Listen more closely. When someone says "maybe," take it as a "no." When they say "yes," it may be just to get you off their backs. Ask them if they know where the event is, how they will get there, if they need child care. Ask if they have room in their car for somebody else. You will get a better sense of their intentions and possibly overcome an obstacle, like transportation.

■ *Blaming Your Co-Workers.* When union functions get a reputation for low attendance, it's a downward spiral. Stewards complain, fewer members show up, and the reputation is reinforced.

TRY THIS: Talk to other stewards. Agree to ban the word "apathy." Come up with specific, realistic attendance goals for each steward. Meet afterward to compare notes. Find out what worked. Don't dwell on the negative. Each new member who shows up is a victory!

## One Steward's Success Story

"How did you get so many of your co-workers out to the union vote?" the Union rep asked.

"I talked about people power," the steward replied. "I told them the boss was watching to see how big the turnout was."

"What exactly did you say to them?" the rep asked.

"I had a list of all the voting times and places and asked which was best for them," explained the steward. "I made a note of their reply and wrote it down in front of them!"

Also, I told them I'd be back around after the vote, to give them the totals. While they could have read the results on the union website, I wanted them to know I'd be seeing them again."

"I reminded myself not to guilt-trip my co-workers," the steward added. "Instead, I challenged myself to do what was necessary to motivate them. That little bit of extra effort paid off."

# What Kind of Impression Do You Make?

**I**n your job as a union steward, you have more contact with, and are more visible to, union members than any other union representative, whether in your official capacity as a steward or in your regular job. When members see you, they see the union. Their impression of the union, and perhaps of all unions, is closely tied to their impression of you. Therefore, you have a unique opportunity to make a lasting impression on workers and, hopefully, members coming into your bargaining unit. That impression can be positive, neutral or negative.

## It's Not Only About that Grievance

There are many ways in which stewards can make a good impression on members.

One of your primary responsibilities as a union steward is to police the contract and handle grievances. Whether a win or a loss, the members' impression of you, and the union, will be influenced by how well you handle a case: Did you take your role seriously? Were you timely and thorough? Did you keep the grievant informed as to what might be expected and how it was progressing?

Remember, however, that while all members of the unit benefit from the protection of the collective bargaining

agreement, only a fraction ever file a grievance. Others may be impressed with the work you do on behalf of their co-workers, but many fail to recognize how the safety net the union provides through the grievance process applies to them.

It's important that you take advantage of other opportunities to make a good impression. For example, if you make it a point to reach out to all new workers you will create an opportunity to positively influence *all* the members of the bargaining unit, not just the few who encounter

workplace problems. The goodwill this fosters will come in handy when the union calls on its members to support its initiatives: volunteering for a community event, supporting contract ratification or endorsing a labor-friendly political candidate.

Here are some things to keep in mind when connecting with members:

**1 Act as early as possible.** Reach out to new employees no later than two weeks after they start their jobs. The first day may not be the best time for much more than a friendly "hello."

The longer you wait, however, the more workers will begin to form impressions about the union by what they hear from management or disgruntled workers. Introduce yourself as the union steward and welcome them aboard. Offer to be available to answer questions they have about the workplace. Save the longer union explanation for later.

**2 Provide useful information on an ongoing basis.** Give new workers, and members if appropriate, a packet that

includes some of the basics about the union: a summary of the contract, key phone numbers, the union's newsletter or website. (The information should be easy to digest and useful to a new employee as well as to existing members.) Remember that not everyone will be as interested in the union as you are. They aren't all going to read up on things or seek out information on their own, so don't let that be the end of the orientation. Develop a system for ongoing communication with the membership on a monthly or quarterly basis.

**3 Make it personal.** Make it a point to have one-on-one contact with each member of the bargaining unit *at least once* throughout the year. Websites and email blasts are good for reaching a lot of people with important information, but as far as making an impression is concerned, nothing beats the personal touch. Even those who aren't

fans of the union or you personally will, in some way, be influenced by your effort to reach out.

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**4 Personally invite workers to the next membership meeting.** Letting

them know the time and place of the union meeting is important, but a personal invitation, even an offer to go with them, is most effective in motivating workers to participate. This is especially important for new members. People don't like going to events where they don't know anyone. Afterward, always have something useful that came out of the meeting to report back to those who didn't attend. They will be left with the impression that the union really is accomplishing something.

**5 Be positive.** Mood is infectious. While the labor movement faces many challenges, highlight the good—and fun—things the union is doing. You don't want you, and the union, to be associated with nothing but problems.

A worker's impression of the union is greatly influenced by what he or she thinks of you. Seeing the union steward as helpful, informative, competent and positive will have a lasting impact.

—Kitty Conlan. The writer, a labor educator at Penn State and with the North Americas Building Trades Leadership Academy, was formerly Education Director at the Laborers' International Union of North America (LIUNA).

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# Communicating Across Cultures

**C**ommunication is the key to so many things a steward does, and good communication skills are something experienced stewards develop. But even experienced stewards have special challenges when the communication is between people of different cultures. (By “culture” we mean common experiences, understandings, ways of thinking, feeling, acting and communicating.)

Chances are your workplace has become more diverse in recent years. Whether you’re working around people from many parts of the globe or just different parts of the country, or in some cases maybe even just your city, you are likely to find that there are different cultures among your co-workers.

When people from different cultures try to communicate sometimes there are misunderstandings or, worse, hard feelings. If you find that you are not connecting with all your members, especially those who are different from you, these tips on cross cultural communications may be of help.

## Learn About Different Cultures and Values

The first thing you may want to do is learn about the different cultures in your workplace. This can be done by reading, surfing the Web or simply asking your co-workers about themselves.

You may learn some interesting, fascinating and very helpful things. For example, people from former communist countries are often suspicious of unions based on the role unions played in their former homes. On the other hand, people from the West Indies might be impatient with the union because in their home countries unions have more rights and support.

To avoid misunderstandings, learn the various customs your co-workers may have in personal exchanges like shaking hands, making eye contact and speaking out in groups.



One caution: Knowing about a culture is just a guide that might help you understand and relate to someone from that culture. Do not look for a “roadmap” for relating to everyone from a particular culture. Everyone’s different, and someone with a background in a certain culture may not display all or even any of the aspects of that culture. Beware of stereotypes.

## Take Time, Listen, Paraphrase

Good listening is always vital, but it is especially important when communicating with someone from a different culture. Let the person finish his or her thoughts. Do not form any conclusions until you are sure you really understand what was said and done. Relax, be flexible, and be open to the possibility that your co-worker is using words in ways different from the way you do.

Be prepared to respectfully ask for clarification or further explanation. For example: “I want to make sure I understand what you are saying. You said the supervisor wasn’t polite. Can you give me an example?”

A good skill to use is paraphrasing. This is when you repeat back to a person what you think you heard him or her say. For example: “What I hear you saying is the supervisor raised his voice to you and used swear words, is that right?”

## Work on Your Delivery

When talking, be aware of how you might sound to someone who is not familiar with

certain words, gestures and tones. Avoid slang, jargon or acronyms that not everyone may understand. Also remember that sarcasm and many jokes don’t translate well across cultures, and adjust your delivery accordingly.

Take your time and look for cues as to whether your listeners are understanding what you’re saying, or if they are confused or offended. Perhaps your hand gestures make them uncomfortable or give a message that you didn’t intend. Maybe they don’t know what the labor board is and aren’t comfortable enough to ask. Perhaps you used a common expression without realizing that it has negative racial, ethnic or sexual overtones.

Try to create a comfortable atmosphere and ask for feedback to see what your listeners are getting from your delivery. Do not just ask if they understand, because many people will say yes even if they really do not. Ask open-ended questions about the content of your message. For example: “What has been your experience with the new rule we have been discussing?”

## Develop Empathy

Understand and appreciate the world view of others. Don’t assume that the way you see or do things is “normal” and they are the odd ones. Respect and learn from the differences.

And, finally, a twist on the golden rule. What you find acceptable may not be appropriate for everyone. For example: In a class I taught for members of a health care union I found that many people were calling each other, “Mr.” or “Mrs.” or “Ms.,” while I much preferred to have people use my first name. In that case my golden rule was “treat others as they want to be treated.”

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

# Accommodating New Mothers

In spite of national legal protections meant to encourage breastfeeding, nursing mothers in North America have reported being harassed, belittled and teased by management or co-workers about taking a break to pump their breast milk.

As a union steward, you can help prevent these kinds of incidences by being aware of federal and state or provincial laws governing breastfeeding, educating your members on the issue when necessary, and creating an environment where pregnant or nursing women feel they can come to the union for help without embarrassment.

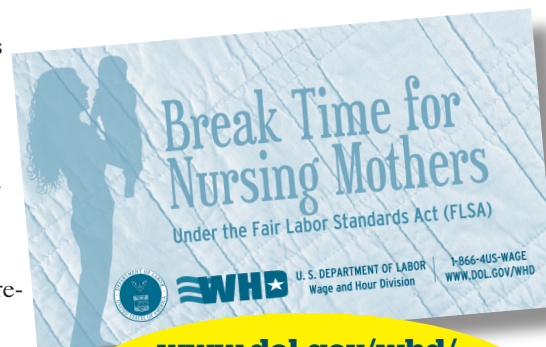
## Legal Protections

In Canada, the right to breastfeed anywhere at any time is protected by the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms; two provinces, Ontario and British Columbia, specifically protect the rights of nursing mothers in the workplace.

In the United States, a provision of the Affordable Health Care Act of 2010 — also known as Obamacare — amended the Fair Labor Standards Act (FLSA) of 1938 to include protections for nursing mothers who have returned to work and need the time and space to pump breast milk for their infants.

Under the recently amended FLSA, employers must:

- 1** Allow breastfeeding workers a “reasonable” amount of break time to pump breast milk for their nursing infants “as frequently as needed” for one year after the child’s birth.
- 2** Provide a private space for pumping breast milk. (The space can’t be a bathroom, and it has to be shielded from intrusion by co-workers and the public.)
- 3** Make these accommodations unless there are fewer than 50 employees—and then only if the employer



[www.dol.gov/whd/nursingmothers/nursingmotherscard.htm](http://www.dol.gov/whd/nursingmothers/nursingmotherscard.htm)

can demonstrate that accommodations would present “undue hardship” to the employer.

Check periodically with your state or provincial statutes as laws change all the time and research may discover even stronger protections for nursing mothers in the workplace. Be aware that state laws only supersede federal law when state protections are stronger.

## Practical Considerations

While legal rights seem simple enough, there are gray areas:

- What constitutes a “reasonable amount of time” to express breast milk?
- What if the space provided is sufficiently private, but is located so far from the mother’s work station that her authorized break time is taken up going to and from the private space?

Canadian and U.S. federal laws don’t specifically address these issues, so you may have to help nursing mothers work out an equitable arrangement with management.

If discussing breastfeeding with your members makes you feel awkward, there are written materials you can use to do

the talking for you. The first thing you’ll want to do is to get a copy of the U.S. Department of Labor’s Fact Sheet #73, which can be downloaded from the DOL’s website ([www.dol.gov](http://www.dol.gov)). Canadians may find the website of the Infant Feeding Action Coalition ([www.infactcanada.ca/Breastfeeding\\_Rights.htm](http://www.infactcanada.ca/Breastfeeding_Rights.htm)) helpful. Posting information on the union bulletin board can be supplemented by giving materials to pregnant or nursing workers and to any managers who challenge a woman’s right to take breaks for the purpose of expressing milk for her baby. The DOL website also offers a downloadable *Break Time for Nursing Mothers Employee Rights Card*—similar to a Weingarten rights card—that workers can print and carry in their wallet in case they run into trouble with a manager. You’ll find it at <http://www.dol.gov/whd/nursingmothers/nursingmotherscard.htm>.

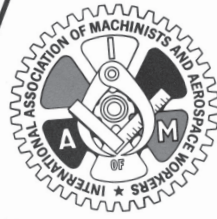
If a nursing mother encounters difficulty getting management to comply with her right to express milk for her infant, your familiarity with her legal protections will be essential to your ability to assert those rights to management. And consider this: would your employer want to be known in the community as being hostile to new mothers who simply want to feed their babies? In your negotiations with the employer, be sure to take good notes, as your union may want to develop its own contract language around the needs of breastfeeding members, and your notes will be invaluable to the bargaining committee the next time a contract is negotiated.

## Creating a Supportive Environment

In addition to offering information to workers and management, a good union steward can protect the rights of nursing mothers by approaching the subject in a mature, positive way. Keep in mind that a woman who continues to pump breast milk after returning to work is clearly dedicated to both her job and her child, and deserves the support of her union brothers and sisters.

—Joan Collins Lambert. The writer is a long-time labor journalist and activist.

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OFFICE OF THE INTERNATIONAL PRESIDENT

Dear IAM Shop Steward:

We've hit the ground running on a new year and a new era for the IAM. For me, that means visiting with our members across the U.S. and Canada to identify how we can become an even stronger and better union. Rest assured that the leadership of this union is listening to you and committed to fighting for you.

But there's one thing I knew before I took this job: it isn't going to be easy. We, working people, are told we're not supposed to stand up for ourselves and against unbridled corporate power. It'll be easier, they say, if we just take what they give us. Clock in, clock out, don't rock the boat.

Let me be clear: The IAM is not that type of union. Whether it's the disastrous Trans-Pacific Partnership trade deal, a corporate-funded Supreme Court case that could destroy public-sector collective bargaining or the wave of so-called right-to-work bills making their way through state legislatures, we're standing up for our rights every step of the way. It seems we're playing defense more than offense, but I see a day when the pendulum swings back to working people calling the shots. That goal starts and ends with us.

Your union gives you the tools to make your own destiny – to defend and expand your rights and fight for a better life for you, your family and your community. We're going to do all of this, and we're going to do it together — the IAM way.

In Solidarity,

Bob Martinez, Jr.  
International President

