

# Communicating with Members

**A**ll effective unions have this one characteristic in common: they build a relationship with members through good communication.

Union members know what's going on within the local union, at the worksite, in the political arena, and in their community. Union officers and staff know members' interests, concerns, opinions and actions.

And *everyone* knows what's going on with management.

The steward plays a vital communication role in an effective union. The steward is responsible for getting all kinds of information out to members in the workplace — union events, benefit information, bargaining information, news about the employer, political and electoral updates, labor and community news.

Just as importantly, the steward brings *in* all kinds of information. The steward is the union's eyes, ears, and voice in the workplace — listening to members' concerns and interests; answering questions and clearing up misinformation; watching and interacting with management — and voicing all that information to the union's leadership.

In their communicator role, effective stewards do more than just distribute and convey information — as worksite *leaders*, they use information to encourage *action*.

Here are some techniques to get the word *out*, get the word *back*, and encourage *action*.

## Always Convey the "Why"

We live in the "information age"—people are bombarded constantly with information. An effective steward will convey the *importance* of the information — *why* it is important to both that worker and our union, and *why* it is important for the worker to take action.

Example: You have a bargaining survey you are distributing to workers.

Without the "why": "Here's a bargaining survey the union wants you to fill out by next week."

Here it is again, but with the "why": "Our union wants to get each worker's views on what issues are important so we can begin our preparations to bargain the best possible contract. Here is a bargaining survey I'd like you to complete so we can get your ideas."

Being able to convey the "why" leads us to an additional handy technique that can make this exchange even more effective.

## Don't "Proclaim," but "Converse"

All kinds of studies show that the quality of communication is improved when it is two-way. The steward who has a conversation with a worker about information will have better results than a steward who just "tells" the information to the worker.

Using the example from above, notice the difference between telling and conversing: You have a bargaining survey you are distributing to workers.

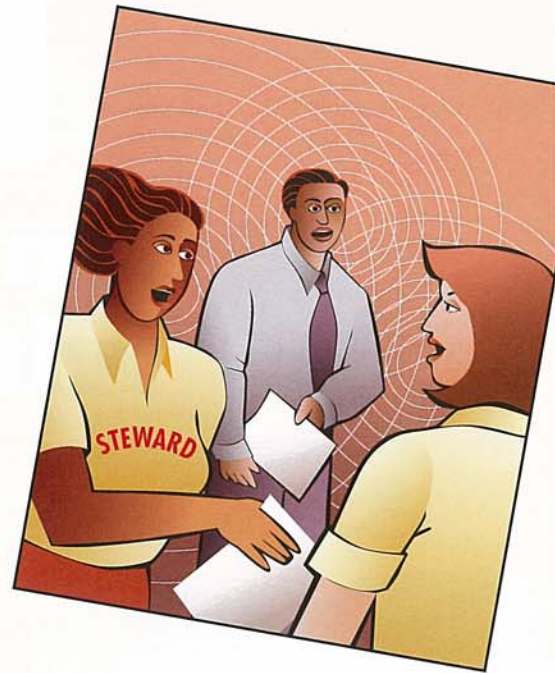
The "*proclamation*": "Here's a bargaining survey the union wants you to complete — fill it out by the end of the week."

The "*conversation*": "What issues do you think will be important for our union to raise when we begin contract negotiations?"

The conversation begins with an open-ended question — a question that requires more than a "yes" or "no" answer. The proclamation begins with a command.

## Choose the Right Time

Everybody's busy (*including you*) but clearly some times are more hectic than others for members. The co-worker running out the door at shift end to pick up children may be less distracted at lunch



time. The co-worker who's not a "morning person" may be more receptive at the end of the day. Choosing a time when members are less likely to be distracted is just common sense.

Members will be more receptive to information and more likely to act on it if they hear it firsthand from the union — from you, the union steward. This is particularly important in situations where we expect management will put out its own information.

When workers hear it from the union first, the union can define the issue rather than "react" to it.

What would *you* want members to hear first?

**Management:** "The union's demand for increasing staff is because the current staff is working inefficiently and the union just wants more dues payers."

**Union:** We are demanding increased staffing because our client caseloads have substantially increased and we want to continue providing quality client service.

Easy choice, eh?

Experienced stewards realize that getting information out to members is more than a "task" — it's an opportunity to engage members on their views and to encourage them to action that strengthens the union.