

The Negotiating Team

Serving on a union negotiating team can be a fascinating and rewarding experience. It gives employees a chance to have a direct say in their destiny and that of their co-workers and an inside view of the process that determines their pay, rights, and working conditions.

It is an opportunity to learn new skills and to have the satisfaction of improving the lives of other people. It is also a position of great responsibility which requires training and discipline.

The union negotiating team must be chosen in a way that ensures it is representative of the employees.

Once chosen, the committee must be trained in the following areas:

Acting as a Team

Each committee member must learn about the concerns of other employees so that the committee can relate as a unified group to management, the news media, and the union membership. The negotiating committee should present a unified face at the bargaining table.

Some methods of team building include...

- Meetings where team members describe work that is done in their work areas or classification and concerns that their co-workers bring to negotiations.
- Visits to each other's worksites so team members can see conditions for themselves.
- Social events so team members can get to know each other and their families.
- Problem-solving. As team members work together trying to develop contract language and bargaining table strategy, they normally will develop increased trust and confidence in each other.

If certain team members don't get along, those conflicts should be brought out in the open and solved. Team members cannot afford to be fighting among themselves when the strain of bargaining hits.

Choosing the Chief Negotiator

Most negotiating committees select someone to head the committee and be the primary spokesperson during bargaining. This person has important responsibilities beyond presenting the union's position at the bargaining table. He or she must also...

- Facilitate committee decisions, attempting to keep the committee focused on representing the interests of the bargaining unit as a whole.
- Build and maintain the unity of the committee.
- Keep the process moving.
- Develop leadership among committee members. Some committees rotate the task of bargaining table spokesperson from negotiating session to negotiating session. This builds members' confidence and demonstrates the involvement of the entire team.

Staying in Touch with the Membership

Negotiating committee members spend so much time with each other and with management negotiators that they sometimes forget how the bargaining process looks to members who are not involved in the same way.

Some ways committee members can avoid this include the following:

- Don't let management insist on unnecessarily long bargaining sessions that take team members away from the worksite. When management is ready to bargain seriously, then long hours are worth it. But before then, negotiating team members can do more to win a good agreement by visiting worksites, explaining union goals and the bargaining process to other employees, and taking part in other contract campaign activities.
- Talk often with other worksite leaders - the contract campaign support committee, stewards, safety committee, and other committees. Keep them informed about the progress of negotiations.

Taking Responsibility for Decisions

Negotiating team members are in the hot seat. No matter what the settlement, some employees are not going to be satisfied and are going to shift blame from management - which refused to agree to reasonable proposals - to the union team.

Team members have to realize that making tough choices about what proposals to insist on and what to drop is part of the job. When the time comes to settle and present a tentative agreement to the membership, team members have to step forward and say, "These are the decisions we made as a team and here's why..."

Making a Personal Commitment

Serving on the negotiating committee can take a lot of time, including weekend and evening hours. At times, team members have to make themselves available because bargaining has reached a crucial point - whether the timing is personally convenient or not. If the campaign is well organized, other union members can help by taking on many of the other support tasks. Even so, negotiating team members must be prepared for the strain involved.