

The Role of the Caucus

In addition to frequent meetings before and after bargaining sessions, negotiating committee members often will need to leave the negotiating table to hold a 'caucus.' Some uses for a caucus include...

You need time to discuss a new management proposal. What exactly does management's proposal mean? What does it tell you about management intentions in the negotiations? How should the union team respond to it, when should that response be provided, and who should do the talking?

You need to keep the union team united. Management has used statements or proposals to try to divide and conquer by appealing to special interests of different worker subgroups. You need to talk openly about management's tactics and how to avoid being divided.

You need to get emotions under control. Team members are angry with management or with each other. Let people blow off steam until you can have a calm discussion about your next moves.

You want to send management a message. For example, you might call for a caucus after management makes a disappointing proposal on a particularly important issue. Management will realize that you wouldn't have caucused if that proposal had sounded reasonably good or if the issue weren't important.

Similarly, you might caucus when you want **to give management officials more time to think** about a proposal with the hope that they will consider improving their offer.

You need to plan for the next subject to be discussed. You may need to discuss what that subject should be, or, if that's already decided, how to handle the union's presentation.

Team members should be trained not to contradict each other at the table but to pass a note to the chairperson asking for a caucus if there is a problem or question concerning what is being said by either side.

A caucus normally should be chaired by the head of the negotiating team and should be run in an orderly way. But decisions should be made by consensus whenever possible, not by making motions and voting. The goal is not simply to reach a majority decision but to resolve, if possible, conflicts and problems that committee members have raised.

You should break for as long as you need to. Toward the end of bargaining, time spent in caucuses may be longer than time spent at the table.

Don't ever be embarrassed to call for a caucus. If there is any doubt about the team's game plan at the table, it is better to take five minutes and straighten it out behind closed doors than to reveal divisions in front of management.