

## **Being A Good Steward. (Part 6)**

**My original intent was to cover more of investigations and interviews as a continuation of Part 5 of the Steward series; but I would like to cover elements of investigations and interviews for area stewards, assistant state stewards and state stewards going into offices other than where they work. But I want to take a moment to discuss some casual observations that are important for putting everything into the proper context. As a long time senior steward and long time state steward, I was very fortunate in that I worked in offices that by and large had decent, hard working managers who cared about their employees. For some of those managers who had at least some ambition, they were constantly in a struggle between what they were required to do that adversely affected their employees and their concern for the welfare of their employees. Some, had all the ambition stamped out of them and were disgusted by what upper management expected and required and the odd manager, had no problem trampling employees trying to implement the impossible requirements of upper management. Through all of this few managers were willing to confront or provoke a state steward; so I was normally treated very differently than other employees and so were the employees in offices where I worked. My long experience with predatory and abusive managers was with what carriers in other offices faced and fortunately, those situations were a minority. But in SCFs, districts, counties, divisions or what-ever sub-division of territory took place if you had 100 office, you generally had 15 or so that were chronic problem offices that could be traced back in most cases to seriously abusive and predatory managers.**

**When problems arose in most offices, a straight forward approach was the best method of dealing with what was likely an isolated issue and where there was no pattern of issues, complaints or problems. This section is a trouble shooter's guide to problem offices where traditional methods are ineffectual and where problems and issues fester.**

**The items that I am going to discuss are all learned experiences from trial and error and the lessons I took from those experiences. I want very strongly to say that all stewards are human and therefore, we make mistakes. Some mistakes are better than others; but any mistake we learn from, particularly when the mistake did not result in an adverse impact on the involved carriers, is well worth having been made if by that experience the steward(s) profit.**

**Each experience is a learning experience and should be cause for serious reflection. In the cases that were handled well; what did you do right and what could have been handled better? Were you lucky or were you well prepared?. In the cases that did not go well; what went wrong? What could you or should you have done differently or**

**better? Throughout my career as a steward I posted four names over my desk. The grievant's name in two cases in which I was the most proud and that were my most successful and the grievant's names in two cases I most regretted. They served as a constant reminder of what was possible and also of what could happen.**

**Any time a steward goes into an unknown environment; the journey will always be full of perils, pitfalls, obstacles and barriers. In our real world, they are never labeled and there are generally no warnings of where they might be, when they might rear their business end or who they might show up as. It could be the postmaster, supervisors, clerks, other crafts, contract carriers, regular rural carrier(s) or relief employee(s), customers, custodians, building landlords or just about anybody. It is also a reminder and a warning that all is not always as it seems. You are the guest that everyone has tidied up for and is on their best behavior, wearing their happy face masks in full costume so that it is difficult to recognize everyone for who they actually are. If you let it happen, you are the audience in a carefully managed stage presentation that may be a complete fantasy. Really deceitful managers will try and convince you they are tinker belle leading you through the magic castle when in reality they are the Stygian host of the gates of Hell. The trick is to recognize the real players from the ones in costume and masks.**

**My first preference would be to introduce myself to all the rural carrier craft personnel present being sure to give them each a business card. If the carriers are not present, I would be sure to leave a business card on their cases. I would be casually looking at everything, trying to get a sense of work methods, office layout mail preparation and presentation, the condition of the carrier cases as well as labels. I would be friendly and courteous to all the employees in the office. But I would be looking for something minor that impacts each of the carriers that should be attended to or fixed. I would note major items, but I would be looking for something minor. In every office I ever went into, there were always at least a dozen candidates for a minor issue and I would mention it to the manager in front of the carriers and ask for his consideration and assistance in getting it taken care of. If you choose your issue properly, it is significant enough to interest the employees; yet, not important enough to start a major controversy. In almost every instance, the manager agreed to attend to it.**

**What you have done is created an opening that tells the employees you are on their side and you have sent a message to management that you are an employee representative. You have communicated the exact messages you wanted to send with little or no controversy or conflict.**

**If possible and there is another item or two that are relatively minor, reinforce the**

message by asking for cooperation in getting something fixed or attended to. It can be something as simple as case lighting, cleanliness issues, removal of stored items that are in the way or case configuration issues.

It is not a good idea to pursue major issues right off the bat. Reserve those for the private meeting where if there is going to be a dispute or controversy; it is not done in the open where a manager may feel the need to posture or take a stand.

I remember one very important occasion when as a state steward I went into an office with the area steward (in Pennsylvania, area stewards covered large areas usually by SCFs sectional center facilities which were later combined into the first districts). In this instance, area stewards covered as much territory as an assistant state steward would today and were not restricted by the 20 office rule. This particular area steward greeted women by leaning in and kissing them on the cheek as a matter of course. In this particular office, he did that on the workroom floor before I even realized what was happening and in front of the rural carriers and the contract carriers. From that moment on, no matter what he did or I did, we were immediately shunned by all the employees. I saw a slight smile on the face of the postmaster when the area steward leaned in to deliver the kiss. It took a lot of effort and a lot of patience for me to establish a level of trust with the employees in that office and the area steward never could, no matter what he ever did after that.

I had a very serious discussion with the area steward after that about appearances. I never could change his habit of the welcome kiss on the cheek; but, thereafter he never did it publicly in a post office when I was present. It was a valuable lesson and I learned it well. Always be careful about the messages you are sending whether they are intentional or not and if a message needs to be sent, make sure it is always the one that is oriented toward your goal of maximizing the trust and bond between rural employees and their rural employee representative.

As far as raising minor issues, most managers will understand and there is no need to explain what you are doing other than looking out for the interests and well-being of rural craft employees. If there is a problem, well, there was likely going to be a problem anyway and if even the minor issues are going to be contentious and controversial; at least you know up front that you have a lot of work to do especially when you get to the progressively more serious issues. In that case you have advance warning that every issue is going to be knock down and drag out.

One last reminder, when you lick your initial issues, you are absolutely not doing it to mislead the carriers into believing that you are an effective representative and will not betray their trust and faith. Trust is something earned one grain and one morsel

at a time; if you intend to deceive the rural carriers into believing in you only to fold; they will know very quickly. If you use this as a ploy; those rural carrier craft employees will know it sooner or later. Then it is simply “well you fooled me once, shame on you; the next time it will be my fault if I am fooled by you again.” You earn trust only a little at a time; when you lie or play people false, they will likely never trust you again. How do you think you can do your job if even the carriers don’t trust you.

If you have been honest with the carriers; even the manager will see that you have integrity and can be trusted. If you are not honest with the carriers; some managers may like that, but don’t make the mistake of thinking that even they will trust you. They are far more likely to try and play you for a fool, for a fall guy/girl, for a scapegoat, for an excuse or for an advantage, but trust is not something you are likely to get even from the worst of managers.

Most managers will actually come to prefer to deal with someone who they can trust; someone who is tough but fair and reasonable. Managers would certainly prefer to deal with an employee representative that his employees trust and listen to. They prefer to deal with someone who is not going to bluff or threaten or make unsubstantiated claims or allegations. They also prefer to deal with someone that understands the position they are in and can offer creative solutions that work for the manager as well as the employee. No manager wants to be caught in the middle where something he might agree to becomes a serious issue with his/her superiors and they certainly appreciate creative solutions that entail the least risk to them. Sometime, the reverse is true where a discussion on the risks of denying a grievance or refusing to settle can lead to more adverse consequences than settling the grievance or issues being discussed.

#### **CARDINAL RULE**

Never, never allow or participate in any action where a manager levels criticism at a rural carrier or carriers. If this happens immediately take steps to stop it, to challenge it and to rise to the defense of the rural carriers. DO ever not allow a manager to give instructions in your presence and tell rural carriers to ask your steward, he/she will tell you the same thing. Always maintain your credibility, but find some way to challenge the manager so that it is clear that it will never be management and the union ganging up on rural carriers. If you let it happen just one time, you destroy any credibility you have with both the manager and the rural craft employees. The manager will know you can be manipulated and the carriers will judge you to having sold out to management.

## **Assess the office situation**

**Talk to the carriers preferably before you go into the office to get a sense of what the manager is like, his/her strengths, weaknesses, his/her methods, how he/she relates to employees, favorites and targets. Also talk to them when the manager is there whether the manager is lurking or whether he/she is overly interested in what is being said. Gather as much intelligence as you can before you sit down for serious discussions.**

**Watch the manager closely for body language, voice inflections, nervous habits. Exercise extreme caution if the manager without prompting urges you to trust him/her, believe him/her or some other extraordinary request. If someone, out of the blue, says trust me, I don't lie, believe me, go along with me on this, wonder why they are saying that. Chances are that they feel the need to convince that they are telling the truth, that they do not lie or that you should trust them.**

**People who are confident of their honesty or truthfulness, never have to ask to be trusted and they never feel the need to tell people that they do not lie. It is taken for granted. When a manager comes across like a used car salesman, the one thing you can be sure of is that they want you to buy the lemon and what they are really selling is a bill of goods.**

**Smart stewards play their hands like poker players. If the other side is giving themselves away; don't call them on it; store the information away and use it to further your investigation, take it into account when you consider resolutions to issues you are discussing (resolutions will need to account for non-performance, faulty information or lack of follow through). If the manager is truly selling a bill of goods, and they are going to continue to maintain that they do not lie or that they have to be trusted; surely they cannot object to performance clauses in any settlement or penalties should the facts turn out different or alternatives should certain situations arise. There is no point in arguing about whether someone lies; just take it into account and a dishonest manager is then victimized by his own cleverness or lack of cleverness. If the manager chooses not to settle, chances are you would not have been able to achieve an equitable settlement anyway and you now have more information with which to expand your investigation. Simply prove that the manager is, in fact, lying or bargaining in bad faith. At least you have more information than you did before, even if it is corroboration for what you had.**

**This discussion now leads into some of the material I was going to include in the original Part 6 and that is investigation and interviews. In previous parts, I mentioned about dealing straight up with people you are negotiating with and referenced a time**

**and a place for subterfuge, for cunning, for utilizing creative methods including bluffs in specialized circumstances. Those specialized circumstances involve and are normally confined to investigations and interviews in the grievance procedure.**

**It is still very important to be absolutely honest; but this is where misdirections, elaborate scenarios, timed interruptions, smoke and mirrors, bluffs, a little theater, hypotheticals, suppositions, allegations and melodrama can come in very handy. Try very hard to not use the exact same techniques every time and especially don't do it with the same people. Some of the suggestions I am going to cite really only work once and if you ever want to use them again with other people; you need to keep the secrets to yourself like magicians do with magic tricks. Your cleverness comes from the results you produce, not from gulling someone or tricking them into damaging admissions and then making sure they know what you did. Believe me, if someone or anyone learns some of these secrets and can put them to specific cases, it will not be long before the word gets around and your bag of tricks is suddenly useless and ineffectual.**

#### **Well prepared steward's arsenal**

- **Blank interview templates for taking notes with a space so that the manager can sign that the notes are accurate about what was discussed.**
- **Copy of certification letter of steward.**
- **Copy of blank request for information form.**
- **Copy of blank request for action form.**
- **Copy of blank grievance forms.**
- **Copy of blank Authorization/Release for grievant to complete and sign.**
- **Prepared file with up to date information/documentation, back ground and statements.**
- **Copies of any similar grievance case settlements, USPS policy letters. etc. and/or NRLCA policy letters**
- **Copies of relevant citations from postal manuals, handbooks, management instructions, etc.**
- **Miscellaneous items that will be covered in a future article.**

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