

When the Member Doesn't Have a Grievance

For most shop stewards, the process of handling grievances is pretty routine. We are out there on the property, every day making sure that management holds to the agreement. And when the member comes to us with a problem, we check it out. We do the proper grievance investigation to determine whether the issue is really grievable under our agreement. But what happens when we do all we can but the problem is not a real live grievance? It's happened to all of us. Your coworker--someone you've worked with for ten years asks you to file the grievance that just isn't a grievance.

What do you do?

Let's start with what you shouldn't do. Don't file the complaint or issue if you know it isn't really a grievance. If you do, you are transmitting three pretty poor messages.

Wrong Message

First, the member thinks you can actually achieve something with the grievance procedure that it isn't designed to do. The member gets the impression that the grievance is a lottery and every entry has equal weight. That simply isn't true and it isn't fair to the member or to other members. Besides you raise expectations that you can't fulfill.

Second, it damages your credibility with management. Part of the goal of grievance handling is to resolve problems; and grievance resolution needs the cooperation of both sides. If you go to management with lousy grievances, you will quickly lose the company's respect. Your judgment will be called into question when you present other issues that might be very legitimate grievances.

Lastly, filing frivolous or poor grievances can make management retaliate and poison the relationship with the union on even larger issues.

What should you do?

Tell the member straight out that the problem isn't grievable under the contract. Explain why. Don't take for granted that members understand the union's role in handling grievances and what the repercussions are for filing frivolous ones. Explain what the process can achieve and what it can't. Talk about the bottom line issue of justice for all members.

Don't procrastinate

Don't procrastinate but deliver the news directly and sympathetically. Expect some emotional heat at this discussion, but listen sympathetically so long as you personally don't have to bear the brunt of any outburst.

Also keep good notes as to your decision and if there is a stewards' meeting at the local, make it part of your report so that the member does not go shopping around for another steward to file the grievance.

Try to resolve the issue

See in what other ways you can resolve the issue. There is no reason why you can't go with the member to discuss the issue with supervision. If the issue is serious enough, discuss it with your officers to come up with a strategy to deal with it.

If the problem is a personal one, direct the member to a union counselor or other appropriate services that are available to the members.

Saying no to the member about filing a grievance is one of the toughest responsibilities you have as a shop steward. Some members will never be satisfied with the answer. But for most members, some demonstration of concern and possible resolution will go a long way in building the local union.