

STEWARDS ORIENTATION

Steward as an Organizer



Steward as an Organizer

This orientation should take no more than 15 minutes

You can download the full Stewards orientation series at <https://opseu.org/member-education/>



What is organizing?

Many trade unionists think that “organizing” just means getting non-unionized workers to sign union cards. That’s only part of it.

This session is about “internal organizing.” That’s working with your own Unit and Local.

These people are already organized. Internal organizing works to forge them into an effective group that can achieve workplace change.



Steward as an Organizer

This means planning your union activities to reinforce the links between members, Stewards and the union.

You do this so the union is stronger for the next round of bargaining, and can make more contract gains.

You do it so management will act on your legitimate complaints and not force you through the long, frustrating and expensive grievance system.



Steward as an Organizer

A union's strength depends on the level of member participation.

The better organized your members are, the stronger their support for the union, and the more you can achieve.

For you, this means working closely with the 10 to 20 people who elected you.



What is internal organizing?

Internal organizing builds OPSEU's strength by drawing as many members as possible into union events.

It applies to bargaining a contract, addressing workplace problems or electing labour candidates to public office.

In union work, active members are your strength.



Steward as an Organizer

Question: What is your starting point as an Organizer?



Answer: Your Collective Agreement.



The Collective Agreement

The Collective Agreement:

- Is why people join unions and why we bargain contracts.
- Spells out your relationship with your employer in your workplace.
- Is the result of hard work.
- Is the most important document you possess.



The Collective Agreement

The Collective Agreement:

Workers join unions to be able to bargain one; they file grievances to enforce the one they have; they mobilize around issues to build support for bargaining solutions; they go on strike to support bargaining demands for a better one.



Steward as an Organizer

Question: Why do we organize in the workplace?

Answer: We organize in the workplace so our managers will see our strength and take us seriously.



Steward as an Organizer

It may be easier to solve a member's problem yourself, but an organizer tries to help the members find the solution and involves them in actions to get results.

It's a strategy that often finds better solutions.

Stewards are more effective when they are organizers, catalysts and leaders, rather than working individuals.

Finding shared problems and collective solutions brings more members into union activity.



Advantages of organizing

Question: What are some advantages of the organizing approach?

Answer:

It's more effective - An employer will listen and bargain when a large number of workers support and are active in the union.

Members gain power when they share in decisions and victories

Reading about an arbitration win in the union newsletter is good. Knowing something you did made an employer back down on an issue is better.



Advantages of organizing

Question: What are some advantages of the organizing approach?

Members learn how union-employer disputes work

Members who understand the issues and processes are less likely to blame the union for a loss and more likely to identify the employer as the problem.

You can tackle more problems

Having a strong core of supportive members makes the union a force of many activists, not a service organization with a few leaders or paid staff.



Communication as a vital tool

Representation means two-way communications with the member.

While meetings are one forum for communication, they are primarily designed for making decisions.

The best way to communicate is one-to-one in the workplace.

This means one person – you – talking to one other person – one of your members.



Communication as a vital tool

Another good communication tool is Local or Unit newsletters and memos. Local publications address local concerns, and report on familiar names, locations and events - as central ones cannot.

Workplace distribution of OPSEU publications (central and local) by stewards lets you check in on members and reinforce your role as a leader, communicator, and representative. It's an opportunity to start a conversation on a union theme.



The nitty-gritty of organizing

You are not alone

You have other stewards in your local, and a nearby regional office staffed with resource people. OPSEU has staff specialists at head office in Toronto to support bargaining, education, communications, benefits, grievances, research, equity, human rights, health & safety and campaigns.

OPSEU is committed to energetic, educated, enthusiastic Stewards in each of our workplaces.



The nitty-gritty of organizing

Use your voice

Active union members determine OPSEU's policies and programs. If they don't reflect your members' views, then not enough of them have made their voices heard. You can build understanding, interest and participation, so OPSEU can be strong and effective.

Recruit people (be even less alone)

If your Local or unit is to thrive, you must involve members as volunteers and leaders. Too often a small core of activists is called on time and time again to do all the work. Not surprisingly, they burn out. Make recruiting new people part of every activity you plan.



Building activists as a Steward

1. Welcome new members

Approach and welcome every new employee. It's good to have a new member's kit with orientation materials. Sit down and go over the organization and functions of the union and the contract.

A new worker may have no previous union contact, or may have had a bad experience. You want this person to have a good experience with OPSEU, and to see the union as a lively, legitimate force interested in their ideas and welfare.

2. Encourage volunteers

Make a list of jobs that need doing. However small they are, you need something for everyone you recruit. Don't ask for volunteers unless you have work for them to do.



Tips on approaching members

- Prepare for the talk. Know how to pronounce names. Know if there are key things you should mention or ask.
- Put the person at ease. Introduce yourself, your name, job and union position. Be polite and friendly.
- Listen closely. Learn the member's interests and skills. Don't interrupt. Keep your objective in mind. Don't argue.
- Think as you listen. Have you asked your key questions?
- Have you met your objectives? Have you heard anything to change your approach?
- End on a courteous note. Thank the member for their time.



Know your area - Map your work Unit

There is power in the natural organization of the workplace, in informal work groups and their leaders. Managers understand this and use it to isolate leaders and exploit weak links.

Map your workplace. Draw an outline of your department. Put in work stations, desks, printers, copiers, etc. Now, put a circle where each of the dozen or so members you represent is usually stationed and write in their names.

Add what you know about them, their union sympathy, seniority or vulnerability, family links to others in the workplace.



Use your Map

Say you have a message to communicate quickly.

If you can give the word to the informal leaders, you know it will get to everyone. When natural leaders co-operate, you can create a network of stewards and de-facto stewards with power and influence.

Informal work groups create loyalties among their members. Draw on this loyalty to develop strategy. Take advantage of people's natural tendency to stick up for those who are close to them.



Organizing tips for Stewards

1. **Question authority**

Organizing begins here. Someone asks, “What are they doing to us? Why? Is it right?” An effective organizer encourages co-workers to think for themselves.

2. **Talk one-on-one**

The personal, one-on-one discussion is the key. Leaflets are nice, meetings are important, rallies are wonderful, but none can replace one-on-one talking. That’s why Stewards are the backbone of any powerful union. Only they have the time and opportunity to talk to each union member. Just taking the time to listen can often win a worker over.



Organizing tips for Stewards

3. **Involve people in activity.**

People learn and grow from taking action; they will take on small tasks if asked personally. “Will you come to our meeting?” “Will you take this leaflet?” “Will you sign this petition?” To increase participation, you must make members feel wanted and important because they are!

4. **Make the activity collective.**

You want members involved, but also linked with others. You want to create a group which sees itself as a whole: We are the union. We are the movement. We can take on the boss in our workplace, and win!



Organizing tips for stewards

5. Escalate activities in any campaign over time.

Ask people for acts increasing in commitment and difficulty. Will you wear a button? Will you vote to reject the employer's proposal? Will you vote for a strike? Will you walk a picket line?

6. Confront management.

To change the balance of power between us and management you must confront the employer in at least a small way. If your members are not ready to upset the boss, they are not likely to win.



Organizing tips for stewards

7. **Win small victories.**

Every challenge to the boss's power carries a risk. You have to build a track record before your members will trust you. Use complaints that may seem trivial as a test. If you resolve these, your members will be willing to talk about tougher issues.

8. **Have an end point.**

Know what you are trying to achieve. Once you have won, let members relax and savour the victory. You can't keep people at fever pitch forever without burning them out.



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For more information:

Visit the OPSEU Member Education web page at <https://opseu.org/member-education/> and download the other Stewards orientation sessions.



Feedback?

Please take a moment to share your feedback.

1. Did you find this orientation useful?
2. Do you have any suggestions for improvement?

Thank you for your time. Please share your insight by sending a quick email to education@opseu.org





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