

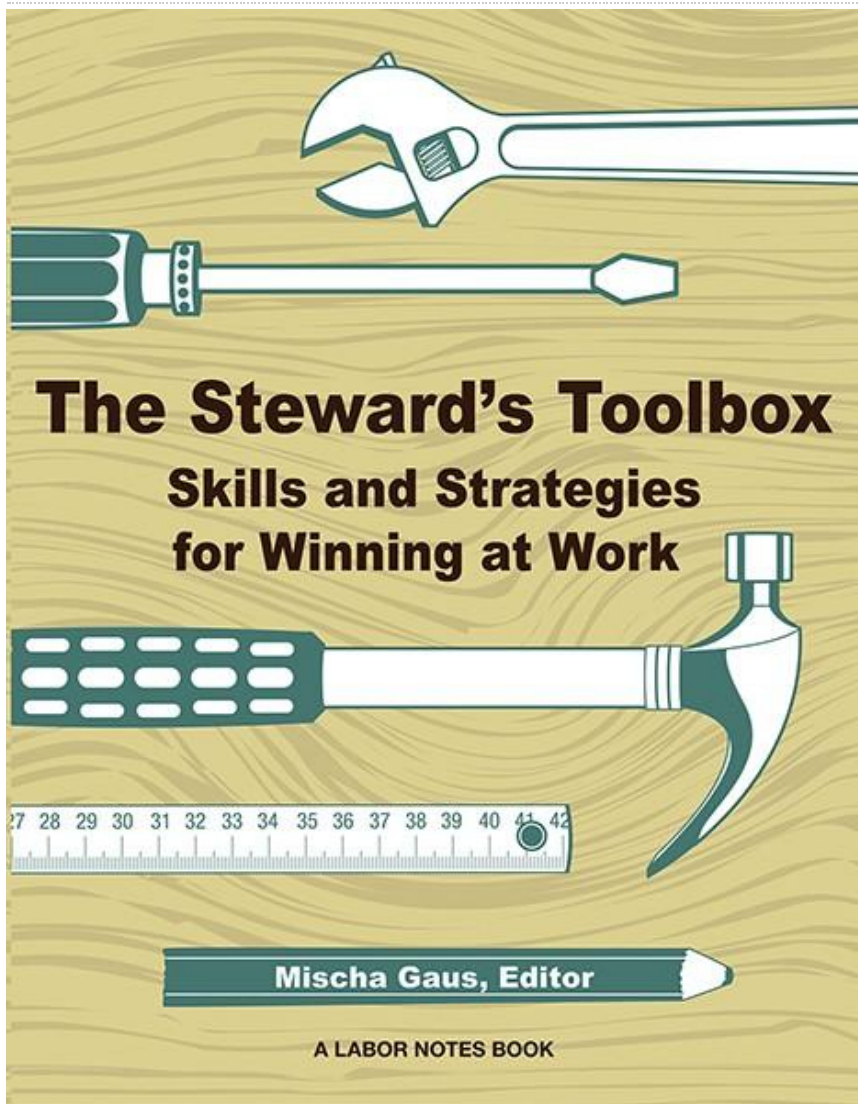
When Bad Gripes Happen to Good Stewards

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Excerpted from [*The Steward's Toolbox: Skills and Strategies for Winning at Work*](#).

Healthy unions should welcome workplace discontent. Stewards can turn discontent into campaigns that build workplace power.

Sometimes, though, too much *unproductive discontent* is floating around. Maybe there's a culture that supports bitching but no action; maybe there are tensions among co-workers that prevent cooperation.

Here's a look at two cases and what a steward can do:

The paralyzed griper. Sofia has been riled up over a pay grade problem for months, and you have heard every chapter of the saga. She feels she's been assigned work above her grade, but isn't being paid accordingly.

The supervisor won't support her application for an upgrade without documentation. But Sofia's dragged her feet because she'd have to prove that her work is different from co-workers in her pay grade, and she's too uncomfortable to actually ask them to describe their work in detail.

She can't file a grievance until she's applied for an upgrade and been denied. If she refuses the assigned work, she thinks she might be found insubordinate or stuck where she is forever.

Sofia's kind of paralyzed, and her co-workers are really tense about it, too. The problem here is that co-workers don't talk freely with each other about their work; a mood of underlying competition or distrust dominates. As steward, you may have to introduce some new standards into the workplace.

Consider a survey that asks detailed information about actual job duties compared to job title (reassuring members that it's anonymous). Then compile the results and post them on the union bulletin board, with some pointed questions:

- » Are you constantly assigned new responsibilities with no change in pay?
- » Should you be upgraded to a higher job title?
- » Is this happening to everyone or just some of us?
- » Have you read what the contract says about job upgrades?
- » Are we better off "just getting by" or should we be "going somewhere"?

GET THEM TALKING

After you get a little buzz going, you could call an informational meeting about the process for job upgrades. Set a comfortable, non-judgmental tone.

Remind members that they are setting precedents for each other which are either bad (allowing standards to remain low and meaningless) or good (forcing the boss to follow the rules and move people up). Remind them that the goal isn't to compete against each other for the same slice of pie, but to cooperate and build strength together to demand a bigger pie.



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Once folks have started to share their stories, it may come out that there are inequities—and these can be uncomfortable to face. Your task is to depersonalize the situation, pointing out that the job of the union isn't to evaluate workers but to make sure the contract is followed.

Help members talk to each other non-judgmentally. Build a sense of shared purpose by moving action along on behalf of affected groups, where possible, rather than individuals.

Doing all of this openly will not only break the tension between co-workers but signal to the boss that things are changing. When the pay grade problems get fixed, what a great confidence-builder for members!

NO GRIEVANCE HERE

Then there's the privileged griper. When Nate asks to talk with you, it's a welcome surprise; he's a respected and influential employee, but he's never been involved in the union. But your enthusiasm fades as Nate lays out an elaborate history of conflict with an upper-level boss who he believes has thwarted his career advancement.

It turns out that Nate has tried—on his own, never consulting the union—to cut deals with various bosses to move up, but has always been stymied. Now he wants to turn it all over to you, making it clear this is his “test” of the union: “After all these years of paying dues, if you can't do something for me, I'll make sure everyone knows how useless the union is.”

A review of the facts makes it clear there is no contract violation, no disparate treatment, no breach of due process...in short, nothing grievable. You may be tempted to file a grievance, do your best, and let Nate lose. But he's likely to lash out against the union. If you reject his request, the result will be the same. So, let's consider some options.

No matter what else, make sure to keep Nate fully apprised of what you're doing. Let him see your activity on his behalf.

Let Nate know you'll have to share some facts of his case, as a condition of proceeding. This is normal because every case has precedent-setting power and may affect the rights of others.

Find some other members who share the respected status that Nate enjoys and who may have similar job frustrations. Ask their opinions. Walk them through the grievance criteria to help them see why you're reluctant to proceed. If they, too, see the absence of merit, then you've found some allies in case Nate blows up.

Next step is to ask Nate to write a summary of his case, including the contract clause he's claiming and the proposed remedy, and give it to the Grievance Committee.

(No Grievance Committee? Now's the time to constitute one and train its members as both advocates and dispassionate gatekeepers of the process.)

Invite Nate to present his case to them, possibly inviting other union leaders to attend, so as to add gravitas to the ultimate decision. At this session, be prepared to let Nate down respectfully and instead generate brainstorming about non-grievance solutions. If you've learned there are others facing the same problem, get them involved in strategizing and use the union's resources to carry out a plan.

Even if Nate drops it at this stage, you will have blunted any criticism by showing him respect, engaging other members, calling on the institutional strengths of the union, and generating creative alternatives to a grievance.

If he still tries to rile up anti-union feeling, it will ring pretty hollow.

Ellen David Friedman is a retired organizer for Vermont NEA and a member of the Labor Notes Policy Committee.

This column is just one of 60 doses of practical advice presented in Labor Notes' book [The Steward's Toolbox: Skills and Strategies for Winning at Work.< i>](#), available at labornotes.org/store, 235 pages, only \$15.