

Leader Identification Exercise

You work for a mid-size school district. The district has 50 schools, including 30 elementary schools, 15 middle schools, and 5 high schools. Your union is made up of 6,000 education workers, including teachers, counselors, paraprofessionals, bus drivers, and custodians.

In your state, educators do not have collective bargaining rights. This means that the school district is not legally required to bargain a union contract with you. Over the years, you and your co-workers have organized around issues like school closures and health insurance, and gotten the school board to vote in your favor.

Three years ago, during your fight with the school district over health insurance, your union organized a petition demanding no increases to premiums, which 55% of workers signed. The school board felt the pressure and voted against increasing your premiums. Since then, workers at individual schools have done organizing around local issues (bad principals, saving individual positions from being cut, etc).

This year, the school district claims it is in financial crisis, and is threatening to raise health insurance premiums, put a freeze on hiring for open positions, and possibly close schools. As a union, you and your co-workers have a goal of winning collective bargaining within the next three years, and you know that mounting a strong fight against any cuts is key to building the unity required to win that – and to saving your schools.

You have just been elected to leadership of your union's local chapter, and you are trying to figure out how to build a strong committee in the next few months that can lead a fight against the cuts and build towards winning collective negotiations. You've just finished meeting with the delegate (school rep) at one of the largest high schools, and here is what you've learned from talking to her about potential leaders and other workers who wield influence:

Darryl Smith is a music teacher and has been at the school for twenty years. Even though he's in a small department – there are only two other music teachers – he seems to know everyone. He runs the school band, which the school is famous for. With his hard work, the band travels around the state for competitions. Because of the band, he knows a lot of the parents, and they are always helping him by chaperoning trips and fundraising. He's famous for the happy hours he organizes monthly with parents at the local bar to fundraise for the music programs. School administrators attend the happy hour sometimes, too. Darryl has some controversial opinions about politics and has been outspoken about them on many occasions. Darryl's sister is married to the assistant principal, and they are close, but he always says that it doesn't impact his support of the union. He was really active in the health insurance fight three years ago, and spoke at a school board meeting in support of the union demands then. Everyone jokes about his daily "uniform," which includes his union lanyard.

Cherelle Williams is a history teacher who has been there for fifteen years. She was the history department chair for years, but this year she said she is finally too busy and doesn't have time, even though everyone wanted her to do it again. She told them she didn't want to be pressured into doing it. Cherelle is the person other teachers go to for advice when they are struggling in their classrooms. At the end of last year, the principal made changes to some of the school policies, including one about how students would be disciplined if they were tardy. All of the staff were up in arms, because it was going to create a lot more work for them, and because some of them thought it was unfair for the students. One day in the staff lounge, Cherelle said that they should all refuse to sign off on the new policy. People agreed, and so she told them to follow up with the people in their departments who weren't there. She got Jennifer to talk to Nicole, who then made sure the paraprofessionals didn't sign it. At the next staff meeting, the principal realized that no one had signed off on the new policy, and announced that the change wouldn't happen. Cherelle is not a union member, and has said she never will be. She thinks paying dues doesn't make sense when they don't even have collective bargaining

rights, and that the union is just trying to get more money for itself. During the healthcare fight a few years ago, she felt that the union waited too long to take action.

Jennifer Okeke is a math teacher who has been at the school for eight years. She is known as the friendliest teacher in the school. She never says no when she is asked to volunteer to be on a committee or help with an event. Because of her, the math department hosts tutoring once a week after school for the students who need it, and it's brought test scores up. Even though she's relatively new, she is the chair of the Math department, because there's been so much turnover and because all of the more veteran teachers are burned out. For her, anything that is for the students is worth it. She also organizes birthday lunches and retirement parties for her coworkers. She is especially friendly with the other younger teachers. She is pretty new to teaching, and had never been in a union before, but she signed up when she got hired. She's the first one to talk to the new teachers each year on the first day of school about signing a union card, and some of them sign up. She has a chronic illness, and is very passionate about protecting their health insurance. Jennifer is in the room across the hall from Cherelle, and they have lunch together. Jennifer recently joined the union's political action committee, and knocked on doors for the last school board election.

Nicole Escobedo is a paraprofessional at the school who has been there for 35 years. She is the most veteran employee in the whole school, and has worked with generations of families who have attended the school. She knows all the ins and outs of the school, and all the gossip. Rumor has it she has set up many successful marriages! Three years ago, Nicole's husband got cancer, and she was his main caretaker, and she ran out of her sick time. All of her co-workers donated their extra sick time to her so that she could spend more time taking care of him. Nicole's mother also worked at the school, and was very active in the union until she retired. Nicole tells people that they should be grateful to have a union, even if they don't have collective bargaining rights. She is friendly with Cherelle, but when Cherelle says it doesn't make sense to be a union member, Nicole says that Cherelle doesn't understand. Nicole thinks Cherelle is too anti-union and has a bad attitude. Nicole used to be the union delegate, but stepped down when her husband got sick. People still ask her to sit in on their disciplinary meetings with them. She once got injured at work, and became an expert in navigating the workers' comp process, which is notoriously complicated. People often go to her with questions about workers' comp and their paid time off.

- 1) Based on what's in the scenario only, who do you identify as the Leader who has moved people the most? Why?
- 2) List the specific order of everyone you want to meet with and why (who first, second, etc)?
- 3) What else do you want to know about each of these four employees? Why?