



Know your adversary and know yourself

If one were to observe the relationship between shop stewards and supervisors in many offices throughout the country, one would be struck by a very subtle difference. In some offices, that relationship takes on a “my way or the highway” approach coming from either or both sides. The grievance resolution meetings normally take on a very negative aspect. Each side expresses its case from its unique perspective, *never really listening to the other’s reasoning or issues*. The steward will approach their arguments from the standpoint of what is fair for the letter carrier(s) they are representing. The manager will argue from where they believe to be the Postal Service’s interests in the dispute or from the standpoint of where their own personal issues are. Rarely will they really listen to what the other side is conveying as *their real issue with the dispute*. Chances of resolving disputes take a dive in such circumstances.

In 1982, the NALC published the *NALC Grievance Training Program*. I attended that training, and for the first time, I was introduced to concepts in dealing with managers that later became known as “interest-based dispute resolution techniques.” That initial training talked about taking hard approaches and soft approaches; it talked about discovering the motivations, pressures and goals of the managers one has to resolve problems with; it asked participants to honestly assess their own individual behavior, their own weaknesses, and their own goals.

Since then, many NALC activists have taken advantage of “Covey training” (*The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People* by Steven R. Covey, 1989), employee involvement concepts, and have even participated in training by the Federal Mediation and Conciliation Service. All of these, despite some different nuances, preach a more sophisticated exploration of what the NALC provided to its stewards back in 1982: Know your adversary and know yourself.

Although sometimes difficult to execute, depending on your inherent aggressiveness, those concepts are pretty easy to understand. If you are a shop steward trying to resolve a grievance with a manager, or if you are a letter carrier attempting to end the dialogue with a supervisor over work-

load with your dignity intact and a favorable outcome, it’s going to take more than just yourself to have that discussion arrive at a favorable conclusion. In many respects, that means knowing what the other person’s issues are and figuring out how to use those issues to your advantage in attaining a favorable resolution.

Knowing what the other person’s issues are is different from presuming what the other person’s issues are. “*I don’t have to talk to that #+ *^!, because I know he’s just an #+ *^!*” The only way one can successfully know is by observing the other person and initiating non-adversarial dialogues with that person. Also, know your own strengths and weaknesses. What are your goals? Is it more important that you look good to your peers or your constituents, or is it more important that you resolve the dispute? What traits do you have that tick people off? What positive traits do you have that you can use to an advantage?

Conceptually, it is pretty simple. Want to test it? Walk up to someone and insult them and walk away. Five minutes later, walk up to that same person and ask them if you could borrow five bucks and observe their reaction.

Over 25 years ago, I was an aggressive shop steward, filing 60 grievances a week, and was in a supervisor’s face every chance I got. I was then exposed to the concepts I put in this article via the 1982 NALC training I mentioned earlier. I began testing it by engaging in non-aggressive, non-postal-related dialogue with the supervisors who hated me. I asked them how their family, their pets, their cars, and their aches and pains were doing. I complimented managers on their choice of ties when they were wearing the winner in the ugly tie contest. Pretty soon, they were coming to me for advice, grievances were resolved before they got filed, and negative issues were eliminated before they began. It wasn’t easy, mostly due to my having to break some of my old habits, but in three months, the office went from 60 grievances a week to none, without giving away a single negotiated letter carrier right.

What a concept—no contractual violations, no grievances, no damaged egos and contractual integrity. ☒