



Small steps can lead to big improvements in labor relations

By Dave Kittross, **cyber FEDS®** Washington Bureau

IN FOCUS: Even when labor relations have been bad in the past, improvements are always possible, said management expert Stewart Liff.

Liff told **cyber FEDS®** that it doesn't always require major policy or rule changes. In fact, the first step to improve the LR relationship can often involve little things. For example, when starting a new position as leader of a Department of Veterans Affairs office, he found that the union space was a small cubicle in the back. Without spending major dollars, he found the union a much better space, which showed that he valued the role the union played in the office.

Liff said that for agencies looking to reduce unfair labor practice charges, the first step is simple -- provide the right training for frontline supervisors. Many of the problems involving labor relations, he said, stem from inexperienced managers and their lack of awareness of what labor law does, and does not, require.

Effective LR officials and negotiators don't have to be natural leaders, he added, stressing that the skills can be achieved through training. One of the biggest problems, he said, is a lack of information between HR to new supervisors. It's important for HR to provide advice that is "grounded in reality, not opaque theory."

Pre-decisional involvement can also play a key role in effective labor relations, he said, but mainly when relations are already good, since PDI is not a "magic bullet" to fix a toxic relationship. When the relationship is poisoned, there must first be groundwork to build trust between the two sides before utilizing PDI. For success, both sides have to realize that it will take a "good-faith effort" to use the process effectively, rather than simply another opportunity for one side or the other to be obstructionist, said Liff. The good news, he said, is that improving the relationship between managers and union reps can be accomplished through training, talking to past negotiators, and mentoring.

"All labor relations are local," said Liff. The "informal relationship between management and labor is much more important than a piece of paper. After all, if the relationship is bad, whatever is on paper will not help the relationship -- both sides will still not trust each other, which is key. If it is good, the collective bargaining agreement will serve as a guidepost, but ultimately the relationship will help enhance performance, not the piece of paper."

Performance as an LR tool

One area where unions and management can find common ground in these days of limited resources, said Liff, is improving performance. He told **cyber FEDS®** that even in a "cantankerous labor-management environment," unions believe in accountability and standards, so long as they are perceived as fair. That means when there are problems, employees must have an opportunity to turn things around, and there also must be reliable consequences for everyone.



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Like management, unions do not want to spend all their time simply defending the "bottom 10 percent," said Liff, because they recognize it causes them to lose the support of the remaining 90 percent. While they do have representational obligations, what often causes issues is the perception that management is targeting employees they do not like, not that they are addressing [performance issues](#) .

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