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22 Rules Of Labor-Relations Communications

1. You Can't Start Too Early. The earlier you begin communications planning, the greater the likelihood of influencing a positive outcome. That's true if you're facing potentially tough contract bargaining, an organizing drive, a corporate campaign, a boycott, a strike or any other big tussle with organized labor.

2. Executive Buy-In Required. The same way an employer needs a smart contract bargaining team, it must have a high-level Labor Strategy Team that, among other things, establishes a sound communications platform and monitors effectiveness.

3. Focus on the Vitals. No matter what else, an employer must communicate:

- Its *strongest* position points (not *all* its position points).
- How it is addressing legitimate problem areas, now and long-term.

The organization's fundamental position must be:

- Fair and fiscally responsible
- Thoughtful, organized, unified and consistent
- *Very* firm, but not hostile
- Well-articulated and in the language of the intended audience

4. Talk About the Important Stuff

- The context and rationale for your approach to the issue
- How employee (not necessarily union) concerns are addressed
- Appreciation for all employees, represented and unrepresented
- Clear advantages to employer's position and proposals
- Relevant current economic and industry factors
- What happens if the organization *doesn't* follow this course of action

5. Stay on the Positive-Offensive. S/he who sets the terms of the debate is much more likely to win it. Don't let the union establish the rules of engagement or identify what issues are most important. Work hard to be the first to communicate – and with the most complete information – *especially* if it's not-so-pleasant news. All communications must be simple, direct, persuasive and frequent. And, yes, your team will get sick of hearing the story long before it sinks in with anyone else.

6. Write It Down. Have a well-reasoned, well-written point of view. Develop:

- “Where We Stand”: A lengthy, persuasive explanation of the employer’s basic philosophies, summary of labor relations to date; key issues facing the company/industry, economic fundamentals, why this issue is so important, preferred outcomes, steps in the process and “How you can help.” This piece forms the basis of all subsequent communications.
- Craft and constantly refine distilled talking points on the hottest topics.

7. Audience Drives Message. Know all the various interested parties and shape messages that highlight their key areas of interest.

- **Internal:** board of directors/trustees, leadership team, union members, unrepresented employees, former employees, volunteers, donors.
- **External:** customers and prospects, elected and appointed public officials, community leaders, neighboring residents, civic activists, special-interest groups, academics, faith community, business partners/suppliers/vendors, other large local employers.

8. Separate the Issues. Stick to the labor-relations topic at hand and don’t let the union drag in tangentials to muddy the waters and confuse people. For example, an organization doesn’t need to endlessly justify its capital equipment modernization program or facility expansion plans.

9. View Through the Union’s Eyes. Conduct ongoing scans for other local/regional or national labor issues and initiatives that may relate to your situation, so you can understand the union’s context for decision-making and its message strategies.

10. Maintain Higher Ground. The union will do whatever it needs to in order to seize the moral high ground, but you can’t allow that to happen. (RNs aren’t the only ones who care about patients and teachers aren’t the only ones who care about kids.) Visibly demonstrate the organization’s integrity and willingness to work cooperatively. Always express optimism that the issue can be resolved fairly and promptly.

11. Know Labor’s Likely Issues. Understand and respond selectively and effectively:

- Changes to health plans/employee contribution, access
- Changes to retirement/pension plans
- Wage offer – steps and scales, special pay, shift differential, tiers
- Workload, “unsafe” staffing levels
- OT, extended hours, scheduling, paid time off
- Administration “waste,” executive comp (“balancing the budget on employees’ backs”)
- Union membership, access to employees
- Labor’s input on decision-making, labor/management planning
- Conflict resolution, grievance procedures
- Employee health and safety
- Job security, seniority
- Training and professional development
- General working conditions
- “Employee respect”

12. Fight the Right Fights. No matter how tempting, don't be drawn into public or private wrangles over non-essential issues. Stick to the fundamentals and don't go near the smelly red herrings — except to dismiss them as such. Never let a blatantly untrue allegation go uncorrected, internally or externally. But don't endlessly debate arcane points that no one really understands or cares about, only making you appear needlessly contentious.

13. Personalize, Emotionalize. Keep communications as human as possible and never refer to yourself as “Management.” Use appropriate levels of emotion in all arguments. Don't rely solely on empirical data and logic if the union employs highly charged rhetoric. Show adequate respect for the bargaining unit as a “tough partner” and criticize in the form of “damning with faint praise.”

14. Give Good Theme

- **Fairness.** “This organization has always negotiated in good faith with its labor unions, and we will continue to do so. We have already settled many of the open issues in the contract — and have made a *very* fair wage and benefit offer.”
- **Integrity.** “For more than X years, this has been an excellent place to work and it will always be. We are committed to this community and to the people who work here. We have many long-tenured employees and very low turnover.”
- **Resource Realities.** “Our industry is in turmoil. We all need to figure out how to do the same or more with less. We can slice the financial pie many different ways, but it can't magically expand.”
- **Continued Operations.** “We certainly don't feel there are grounds for a work stoppage in this case, and it would strictly be the *union's* decision to strike. In turn, they must respect our responsibility to keep our commitments to the community, to customers and to non-union employees. No one group should be able to interrupt the vital work of this organization.”
- **Positive Resolution.** “We'll meet anytime, anywhere so we can get this issue settled equitably. But it will be resolved only when the union meets us *at least* halfway.”

15. Be Ready, Move Fast, Target Well. Establish electronic and print communications mechanisms – email distribution lists, Intranet pages, special section of public website, newsletters, hotlines, etc. – *well in advance* of contract bargaining, organizing or a corporate campaign. Create a communications vehicle for distribution immediately after each major event. Make sure your “Labor News Update” is always out first. Develop “An Open Letter to.....” format for personalized communication to influential opinion leaders.

16. Prepare and Trust Managers. Frontline supervisors are critical to success because employees feel they get the straightest scoop from them. Prepare supervisors and managers to communicate effectively by means of in-person training, tailored background materials (print and electronic), talking points and constant coaching/support. Help managers hear undefensively and give them a safe place to vent if needed.

17. A Good Story Is Well Told. Your story is only as credible as the storyteller. Designate a single spokesperson and a reliable backup. Top qualities of a good spokesperson:

- Someone from the trenches – not a lawyer, PR person or CEO
- Not on the bargaining committee
- Relatively high profile and possessing a solid reputation

- Articulate, unflappable and persuasive
- Coachable....and actually willing to do the job!

18. Background the News Media. Don't assume reporters and editors understand labor-relations issues and processes. If appropriate:

- Conduct "Labor 101" and "Economics 101" briefings with targeted reporters.
- Prepare basic backgrounder packets for reporters: Summary of key issues, timeline, next steps and desired outcomes.
- Arrange for editorial board meeting(s) if the issue has broad community impact.
- Have mechanisms in place to produce opinion pieces and letters to the editor.
- Cheerfully accept that certain organizations – such as a hospital, a school district or a major employer – are always high profile and more easily attract media attention.

19. Advertise If Necessary. Develop a basic "Fairness" campaign for ads to run in local newspapers and other media. If the situation gets really nasty, consider a "Myth/Reality" platform for conveying the employer's position.

20. Ramping Up. The key to successful communications in any strike, sickout, slowdown or other work disruption is "proportional response." If there is a minor problem, the employer must respond in a low-key, factual fashion and not needlessly inflame the situation. But communications must be immediately scalable. If there is a full-blown strike, all appropriate resources must be pressed into service.

21. No Shooting in the Same Foxhole. Colleagues can get cranky in stressful labor-relations situations, disagreeing mightily. But there's nothing worse than an organization sending mixed messages. All the key players have to be on the same page – board members, the executive team, key work group managers, the VP-HR, labor relations director, in-house and outside counsel, and the communicators. Never be divided and conquered.

22. Put a Ribbon on It. Have a solid plan in place for "Resolution and Reunification."

- Determine if communications will be done jointly with the union or separately.
- Prepare a straightforward summary for internal use and issue a news release.
- Communicate that "this may not have been a lot of fun for everyone, but we came to an honorable, equitable resolution."
- Send a CEO "let's all get back on track and move forward" letter to all employees.
- Monitor internal relations and coach supervisors to "manage to the change."
- Provide employees with a confidential way to ask questions and voice their fears and frustrations, if workplace problems persist.
- Resume normal operations as quickly as reasonably possible.
- Do a thorough post-mortem of communications effectiveness.