



Union Relations

Management Behaviors Make the Difference

By John Green

Is it right to assume that managing in a Union setting will be an adversarial experience? In my view, and from 20 years of experience working in a Union environment, the answer to that question is a definite no. And now I'm going to make a statement that most company leaders don't want to hear: **If you managed better, you would probably have better Union relationships.**

Helping managers enhance their coaching approaches over time can have the residual benefit of improving relationships with local Union representatives.

– John Green

I know that this statement alone may seem inflammatory, so early on I want to point out that I am not addressing the political side of Unions on the state or national levels. I'm referring to the one-on-one, everyday relationships with local Union representatives and stewards who typically want an environment in which the people they represent are treated fairly and can be successful. For example, at one time, when I managed a Union team in a large multiple-locations call center, I worked with an outside consultant to develop a system designed to encourage high performance. The system included sophisticated performance measures and focused on requiring first- and second-level managers to spend more time coaching their people. A very strong, local Union president looked at the plan and said, "Finally you're making managers do their jobs!" She was a tough cookie, but she was happy that our plan was addressing the fact that managers often don't spend enough time coaching their employees.

This reality applies to both Union and non-Union environments. However, in a Union environment, if someone is suddenly fired, Union representatives can step in and ask the same questions that an HR representative might ask, with a dialogue much like the following:

HR Rep: "So you want to fire this employee. Show me your development plan for this person."

Manager: "Well, we gave her an annual appraisal last year and we told her she wasn't doing well."

HR Rep: "Okay, what did you do between then and now?"

And then you hear the crickets. HR people are often seen in the same light as Union stewards. They're perceived as the enemy when often all they're saying is, "Hold on! You can't fire somebody just because you're managing by exception. You didn't do your job!"

Are most managers/supervisors doing their jobs? Here's what we know about the average management approach to coaching performance:

- Many managers focus on exceptions/outliers of performance.
- When most employees are asked, "When do you hear from your direct supervisor?" They answer, "When something is wrong."
- A majority of managers target short-term results with little, if any, focus on behaviors.
- Most first-level managers/coaches spend less than 10 percent of their daily work in direct coaching/reinforcement activities.
- Most organizations view constructive feedback ("Try this") as a negative interaction.
- When constructive feedback is provided, follow-up rarely occurs.
- For many performers the only time their performance is discussed is during their yearly appraisals which usually start with the "there should be no surprises" cliché. This is often where trust issues begin to emerge.





Based on the above dynamics, Union representatives/leaders are often viewed as the “protectors” of the workers when they perceive that the workers are treated “unfairly.” **In short, the organizational culture establishes an adversarial environment by *not managing*.**

In my experience, many local Union reps are not average performers/employees. They often are good to excellent performers, and their decision to get involved in a Union position is a reaction to the management dynamics outlined above. They are frequently put into a position of representing individuals and issues under circumstances that they view as avoidable if only more proactive managing/coaching had taken place. Managing by primarily attending to what you don’t want often manifests itself in Union jargon as “disparate” and/or “unfair” treatment. Union representatives do not see themselves as protecting “bad” performers but rather trying to get recognition for contributions that are often ignored.

Identify desired behaviors, provide constructive feedback, give positive reinforcement—most managers don’t do this. Then, when they manage by exception and an issue arises, management wonders why tension

exists between themselves and the people who are representing Union employees.

Yet managers who are clear and consistent in their expectations and practice some of the coaching behaviors that we know can drive Discretionary Performance™ usually have a professional, productive relationship with Union representatives. **Therefore, helping managers enhance their coaching approaches over time can have the residual benefit of improving relationships with local Union representatives.** This is not to imply that there are no legitimate complaints regarding Unions, but I do know that managers can take action using a coaching and performance improvement process that would heighten the probability of Union representative cooperation.

What’s the first step to turning around an already adversarial relationship? **There is no silver bullet, but for me, it has been to state exactly what you’re willing to do, set clear expectations, and then do what you say you’re going to do.** In an environment where the desired behaviors are specific and feedback and positive reinforcement for same are provided, usually Union leaders will want to work with you. Union leaders are people too and when they see that management is legitimately trying to help people get better at what they do, the Union is usually on the same page.

Let me recount one such experience. In the call center mentioned previously, we set up a system that measured and reinforced supervisors for coaching the performance of their direct reports. The plan was quite successful but, at some point, managers discovered that several of the call center employees had been accessing information regarding billing and services and sharing, even manipulating, that information for friends and relatives. All call center employees were told clearly that without exception this behavior was illegal, would not be tolerated, and that another

infraction on anyone's part would be met with dismissal. Unfortunately, our best employee subsequently repeated the action and I was forced to fire him. The Union went through the formalities and came up with the following conclusion: "You did your job and the person got the consequences he deserved."

The same holds true when trying to add to or change the dynamics of an employee's role. For example, sometimes people who identify themselves as great service providers and who are doing a great job may have difficulty transitioning to sales behaviors such as offering extra services to the customer. They may basically view doing so as being the proverbial used-car salesman. In such a case, the role of a manager/supervisor/coach is to help that person change—incrementally—and to help them understand that making customers aware of the organization's great products is actually good service.

Instead, if a work context changes and someone can't make such a transition quickly, the company wants to let them go—even after 20 years of exemplary service. The Union then gets involved. They are actually speaking the language of behavioral reasoning: *"What have you done to help this person? Where is the record of coaching support or evidence of development support?"*

Often the answer is "I've done nothing" or "I started working with them two weeks ago." And now you're going to fire this person? The point is that often, Union representatives really are speaking the language of positive behavioral coaching and feedback. Generally, in circumstances in which they see you have done everything you possibly can and it's just not going to work, they're more likely to collaborate with you, asking, *"How do we make the best of this?"* or *"Could this person work someplace else?"* because, understandably, the Union



likes to keep people gainfully employed whenever possible.

The bottom line is that if your organization is one of command and control, and top-down dictate, you will encounter an adversarial relationship with your employees whether or not they are Union members. Union members simply may have a bit more clout, but when Union representatives trust that management shares the best interest of employees, then reasonable and positive relationships can develop. This has been my personal experience even when taking on positions where adversarial relationships were once deeply engrained.

Once Union representatives realize that management's interest is to help, when they realize that management understands that successful, well-performing employees make a better company, they are willing to work with you, because they speak that language. Therefore, if you are a member of a management team that asserts: *"We can't implement positive behavioral strategy here because the Union won't trust it!"* ask this question: ***"Have you earned that trust by doing your job?"***

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[About the Author]

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John Green is an experienced executive, consultant and coach. John earned his undergraduate degree from New York University and obtained a Master's degree in Gestalt Organizational Systems and Design from the Gestalt Institute in Cleveland Ohio.

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