

## THE TEAM MEETING



### Confidential Instructions for the Union Steward

You are a member of a newly created work team in your factory. There are five members of the team, one of whom is absent today and one of whom is attending a two-day safety training session. As a result, there are three team members at today's team meeting -- the newly elected team leader, a high seniority manufacturing tech and a low seniority manufacturing tech. In addition, the meeting includes the supervisor, who is now referred to as the team advisor, and the union steward (yourself).

Recently, the team has been taking on more responsibility for daily decisions, such as job assignments, vacation scheduling, overtime balancing, and ordering supplies. There has been more teamwork lately, but there has also been more conflict as team members have begun to be more honest about what is bothering them.

The weekly team meetings are one hour long and you are twenty minutes into this meeting. The team leader opened the meeting with a review of the agenda, followed by reports on safety, quality, schedule and cost performance. The team learned that safety and quality performance had been good, but that there were some problems with schedule. Apparently, this work area has been identified as a "bottleneck" in the production operation -- things get backed up at some of your machines, which means that other operations further down the line don't get all the parts they need. On cost, the team saved money by reducing scrap costs, but there is too much downtime due to unscheduled machine repairs.

There is just forty minutes left in the meeting. For each of the remaining agenda items (which are listed below) the time is listed, along with the name of the person who put the item on the agenda:

1. Running machines without safety guards (5-7 minutes -- Team Leader)
2. Skills progression/job rotation (5-7 minutes -- Low seniority Manufacturing Technician)
3. Preventative maintenance/work standards (10 minutes -- High seniority Manufacturing Technician)
4. Absenteeism issues (5-7 minutes -- Salaried Team Advisor)
5. Shift-to-shift competition (5-7 minutes -- Union Committee-Person)
6. Summary of decisions and assignments and next meeting agenda (5 minutes)

Each person will take the lead in presenting the item that they put on the agenda. The low





seniority manufacturing technician is the team recorder and you assume that this person will keep a good record of any decisions reached and any assignments undertaken. You have a few moments now to reflect on each of the agenda items in turn.

**Running machines without safety guards.** You are glad to see the safety issue on the agenda. You have watched some of the new, lower seniority employees run their machines without the safety guards or with "modified" guards. You know it is a way to save a half step, but you also know that the guards are there for a purpose. Learning after an accident is too late. As a union representative you are prepared to be quite firm on safety. You hope, however, that the team can handle this without direct action by you.

**Skills progression/job rotation.** You are not sure what the story is here. There is much to be learned about the new pay system where people can earn higher levels of pay if learn to do more jobs in their work area. Your guess, however, is that some employees are resisting the rotation while others are pushing for rotation. You will have to be careful here -- if you push too hard on either group of employees it could compromise your role as the representative of all of them.

**Preventative maintenance/work standards.** This sounds like an important issue and you have some suspicions about what it means. You know what preventative maintenance is -- regularly scheduled repairs and replacement of parts, combined with keeping machinery clean and in good condition. You also know what work standards are -- the standard time needed to produce a part under normal conditions (if there ever was such a thing). Changes in the work standard are covered under Article IV, Section 4 of the national agreement, which reads:

"When a production standard is established and it is not disputed, or is disputed and settled, the element times shall remain unchanged and not subject to dispute unless and until the operation is changed as a result of change in the method, layout, tools, equipment, materials or product design."

This sounds like a possible change in method, which would call for the union time-study representative and an industrial engineer to come and re-time the job. Then, the company would have to follow the "Manage the Change" process, where workers are given advance notice of the change and a chance to comment on it -- even if the change is within management's right under the contract.

**Absenteeism issues.** This is the advisor's issue and it is a complicated issue. You want to be sure that everyone in the team does their fair share of work and that the existing collective bargaining agreement is honored. You don't know if there is a specific problem here. As you look around you notice that one team member -- Sam -- is missing. One thing is sure, you will not have any worker-against-worker dynamics on a subject that could result in disciplinary action. Your perspective on this issue is very clear -- if the general issue of attendance is discussed that is fine. However, if any specific worker's attendance is the issue than you will insist that it has no place on the agenda since it is possible that discipline could be involved (which can happen after as few as five instances in a three month period). When you agreed to help support the work team concept it was with the clear understanding that discipline would be



handled in the traditional fashion between you and the advisor -- and outside of team meetings.

**Shift-to-shift competition.** The final item was added by you. You have never before put any items on your team's agenda, but years of experience have taught you just how serious "shift-to-shift competition" can be. Both the team leader and the advisor have been pushing for higher volumes, which you see as pitting worker against worker. Each shift ends up leaving the other with very little in-process inventory. Issues like this have not traditionally been part of the formal roles of a committeeperson, but if this isn't solidarity then what is? Your aim is to foster some creative problem-solving to stop these dynamics before they get out of hand. You do not expect to solve the problem, just to begin constructive dialogue. For this reason, you only requested 5-7 minutes for this item.

The team has had some training in communications and confrontation skills, as well as in effective meeting processes. You will do your best, as always, to use these skills during the meeting. Also, you will make sure that the resolution to any issue involves a clear plan -- with assignments specified, due dates set, and names noted. Also, you want to be sure that the team is clear in outlining what successful completion of the assignment would look like. Of course, all of this has to take place within the incredibly tight time constraints on your agenda. As you get ready to dive in on the last forty minutes of the meeting, use the little preparation time you have to address the following three questions:

- \* When the team gets to your agenda item, how will you present it?
- \* What do you need to do to be ready to address any of the other agenda items?
- \* What would be acceptable or desirable outcomes on each of the agenda items -- from your perspective, from the perspective of the other team members, and from the perspectives of the company and the union?