

Building trade union member commitment and participation: the critical tool of new member orientation programmes



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The effectiveness of trade unions in improving the work lives of their members is largely determined by the degree to which their members support the efforts of the union (member commitment) and the degree to which they are willing to engage in work on behalf of the union (member participation). Building member commitment and participation are two of the most important challenges facing union leaders at all levels. Both member commitment and participation in union activities can be strengthened by high quality orientation programmes for new members. Such programmes involve meeting with new employees who have not yet joined the union or new members who have recently signed on. The purpose of the orientation is to provide participants with information about the role the union plays in the workplace, the ways the union makes the workplace better, and the benefits and expectations that come with being a union member. It also represents a critical opportunity for the union to inform and educate new members about the values of the union and what it stands for.

A recent study based on surveys of union members and their experiences with orientation programmes in the United States found that members who had a positive orientation experience had higher levels of union commitment than members who did not have such an orientation and members who had a less than positive experience. The power of orientation programmes to influence member attitudes was underscored by the finding that orientation programmes that are not done well, and are not seen by new members as helpful, actually result in attitudes toward the union that are more negative than those of members who have not had an orientation programme. The impact of new member orientation programmes on member commitment was consistent across all members, regardless of race, gender, or age. A follow-up survey, conducted one year later, indicated that the initial positive impact of high-quality orientation programmes has on union commitment is long-lasting. Also, union members with higher levels of commitment were more likely to be participating in the work of the union than members with lower levels of union commitment.

The survey results, as well as follow-up interviews with local unions that have ongoing new member orientation programmes, suggest several factors that can make the difference between an effective and an ineffective programme:

1. Unions should ensure that every new employee represented by the union attends a new member orientation programme. No exceptions.
2. Unions should try to engage new employees in a new member orientation programme at the earliest possible opportunity so that they, rather than others (managers or ill-informed, disgruntled co-workers), can provide the employee's first impression of the union and the positive role it plays in the workplace.
3. Unions should ensure that everything about their new member orientation programme is of the highest quality possible. The research indicates that even things like the quality of the materials and food provided can influence the new member's view of the union.
4. In particular, unions should take care in choosing the facilitators who will conduct the new member orientation programmes. It is important that they are knowledgeable about the union and committed to both the organisation's mission and to the goals and objectives of the programme. They should also have good communications skills and they should represent the diversity of the union's membership.
5. The union should look at the initial new member orientation programme as the first part of an on-going effort to influence the new employee's attitudes toward the union. Union representatives in the new member's workplace should regularly touch base with the new employee in their first few months and let them know that they are available to answer questions or help with any issues about the job, the employer, or the union.
6. Lastly, when the new employees have chosen to become members, the union should try to get them involved in the work of the union in some small way. The new member could be asked to attend a union meeting, invited to help with a union social event, or encouraged to become a member of a union committee.

The evidence is clear, new member orientation programmes can shape the attitudes and the actions of the next generation of union members. Investments in these programmes by unions will, potentially, generate the greatest return of any activity into which the union puts time, effort, and money.

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