

What Holds People Back? Fear, Hopelessness, Division, & Confusion

What holds people back from confronting the boss about workplace issues? Instead of blaming “apathy,” it’s important to find out the actual reasons. You have to diagnose the problem before you can write the prescription.

This chart shows four common obstacles the boss relies on to keep us from getting organized—and how you can help your coworkers get past them:

The boss relies on ...	The steward organizer ...	Coworkers find ...
... fear of conflict and retaliation.	...taps into righteous anger about workplace injustices.	...the courage and determination to act.
... hopelessness , the feeling that things can’t change and we have no power.	...helps develop a plan to win , and shares examples of victories elsewhere.	...hope that change is possible and worth fighting for.
... division , pitting workers against each other.	...identifies common ground and builds relationships.	... unity to act together.
... confusion , passing around messages that will alarm or distract us.	... interprets and shares information, fitting it into a bigger picture.	... clarity to see through the boss’s plan.

It's Not Apathy: Identify the Real Problem

Look for fights you can win with the people you have on board. Your workplace may feel like it's bogged down in "apathy," but under the surface, there's always something else going on. Here are some ways to understand what looks like apathy, and respond to it.

The problem:	What's going on:	What to do:
"No one seems to care."	Everyone cares about something—but the something might not be what you expect. <ul style="list-style-type: none">• The issue you've focused on might not be a priority for your coworker.• The co-worker may feel strongly about other issues that haven't caught your attention.• The co-worker might assume the problem isn't your issue, or isn't a union issue.	Listen. <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Pick a few coworkers you'd like to know better. Make a point out of talking with them to find out what's on their minds.• Show respect and understanding for the issues your coworkers care about, and they'll be more likely to do the same for you.

The problem:	What's going on:	What to do:
"It's hard to see how things could change."	Your coworkers don't believe that they have the power—yet. <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Most people have always felt powerless and disorganized at work. They've never felt strength in numbers.• Problems seem too big to tackle.• The boss has cemented the idea that his/her decisions are final.	Show your coworkers that change is possible. <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Bring people together.• Start small. Look for fights you can win with the people you have on board so far.• Develop a credible plan to win. Ask, "What's our solution?" "Who has the authority to say yes?"• What could we do together to get that person to say yes."• Share stories of tactics that have worked elsewhere.

The problem:	What's going on:	What to do:
<p>“No one comes to meetings.”</p>	<p>People won't be motivated to attend unless they feel their participation matters.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • If a meeting is just to “get information,” it's easy to skip it. • An email or a notice on a bulletin board won't inspire people to attend. 	<p>Give your coworkers meaningful roles. Let them know how their presence or absence will affect issues they care about.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Make the meeting pleasant and productive. Prepare a clear agenda, a time limit, and a reason to attend, such as a hot issue. • Face-to-face invitations are best. Divide up your workplace and find several other people to share the work of inviting people individually. • Consider ways to make meetings more accessible: scheduling, location, childcare, translation, transportation. • Be flexible. Sometimes people simply can't make it to meetings, but they can still play crucial roles when they're at work.

The problem:	What's going on:	What to do:
<p>“No one's willing to do anything.”</p>	<p>Many people won't initiate activity, but they might respond if asked directly by someone they trust.</p>	<p>Figure out small, specific requests. Approach coworkers personally.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Respect the time constraints in your coworkers' lives. • Show lots of appreciation for anything they're willing to do. • Make it clear that any victories were won by the whole team.