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Inoculate Your Co-Workers against the Boss's Tactics

October 18, 2016 / Alan Hanson

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IKEA workers in an organizing drive were prepared. When management offered raises, they demanded that their hours not be cut. Photo: Alan Hanson

The last time you organized a petition or voted to strike, were any of your co-workers caught off guard by the way the boss reacted? Was someone disciplined—or promoted? Did the CEO send out a misleading letter, or show up on night shift to shake everyone’s hand?

Whenever we take action at work, we can expect management to fight back—though the tactics vary widely, depending whether they're trying to scare us, confuse us, deflate us, or divide us.

As organizers, we need to prepare our co-workers for whatever the boss might lob our way. For that we use a method called inoculation.

The point of inoculation isn't just to let workers know what the boss will do. More important is teaching them to interpret why the boss is acting this way.

POWER CONVERTERS

One of the most important laws in physics holds that energy cannot be created or destroyed—only converted from one form to another.

For instance, the gas we put in our cars holds potential energy, stored in the bonds of its molecules. That's converted into heat energy when it mixes with oxygen, mechanical energy when the crankshaft starts turning, and finally kinetic energy that propels us down the road.

In organizing, just like in physics, workers can't create power out of thin air. To win the changes we want, we're not simply building power—we're taking power from someone else, the boss.

Much more than money, every workplace fight is about power. When we organize, we challenge the boss's control. That's why management will fight so hard to keep things the way they are.

We can expect resistance any time we take more power by getting ourselves more organized—for instance, when we petition a manager about a workplace problem.

WHAT TO SAY

To explain how energy is converted into different forms, physicists use complicated mathematical formulas. Fortunately, we're not physicists.

To explain to our co-workers how boss power is converted into worker power, we use something much easier to understand—an organizing conversation. That means:

- » Asking open-ended questions to find out your co-worker's concerns
- » Agitating on those issues
- » Laying the blame on management
- » Making a plan to win
- » Asking your co-worker to commit to take some action
- » Inoculating her against management's tactics—and then recommitting her to the plan
- » Agreeing on how you will follow up

Each step is important—and you can read more about them all in the Labor Notes book *Secrets of a Successful Organizer*. The inoculation step is our opportunity to discuss why our boss won't give anything up without a fight.

Here's how you inoculate a co-worker:

1. Ask questions about how the boss will react to your organizing.

A fundamental principle of organizing is that we should listen more than we talk. If your co-worker participates in the conversation, she'll be far more likely to remember what we discussed. So don't just launch into your spiel about power.

Instead start with questions: "Do you think the boss wants us to organize? Why not? When he finds out we are organizing, how do you think he'll react? What do you think he might do to try and stop us?"

2. Discuss *how* and *why* the boss will fight.

Luckily, we know the bosses' playbook and can usually predict how they will fight. If we're preparing for a strike, we can expect the boss to hire extra security and threaten us with permanent replacements.

If we're organizing our workplace for the first time, we need to be ready for captive-audience meetings where management tries to scare us with talk of union fines and fees. The week before the vote, we need to be ready for our boss to beg us to give him a second chance.

If we're planning a smaller action like a union sticker day, we can expect supervisors to tell workers we're not allowed to wear the sticker. In fact, any time we confront the boss with a new tactic for the first time, the boss will probably try telling us we "can't do that."



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Inform your co-workers ahead of time what their rights are, and how to react when they're denied. For instance, one nurses union prepared for a button day by setting up an online form for nurses to report if they were told to take the button off.

Sure enough, some supervisors broke the law, the nurses documented it promptly, and the union filed unfair labor practice charges, bolstering its legal leverage in the contract campaign.

It's equally important to discuss why the boss will fight. We have to help our co-workers understand that this is a battle for power. Then even if the boss does something unexpected—gives everyone a raise, for example—they'll recognize this as an attempt to undermine our power and unity.

3. Don't forget to recommit.

Inoculation is designed to empower our co-workers, not scare them. To make sure you've hit the sweet spot, after inoculating a co-worker to the boss's campaign, ask whether she's still with us.

You might say, “Are you still serious about changing [the top issue this co-worker has identified] by coming with us to deliver the petition?”

Most likely the person will confirm that she’s still serious. This doesn’t make her bulletproof, but it will strengthen her resolve that she’s made this commitment out loud to you—and to herself. Later, if the boss does something that makes her waver after all, you can remind her of this conversation.

But if the person expresses some doubts now, that’s okay too. She’s getting real with you. This gives you the chance to ask more about her concerns, address her fears, and agitate further on the issue she just told you she cares about. If she doesn’t take action, is that problem going to solve itself?

ACTION MUST FOLLOW

Even the best inoculation conversations won’t be enough if the boss campaign goes unanswered. Try to think a couple steps ahead—anticipating what the boss will do, how your co-workers will react, and how you can flip the employer’s tactics to workers’ advantage.

If the boss gives a pay raise, celebrate it as a union victory. If he holds an anti-union meeting, take it over.

In a factory organizing drive, a union-busting consultant held mandatory meetings with workers on each shift. In the first meeting, to show that he wouldn’t be intimidated by “union thugs,” the consultant produced a pistol from his briefcase.

Word got out. In the second-shift meeting, workers brought water pistols and doused him. That union-buster never came back—and the workers won their election.

When workers were organizing last year at IKEA, the furniture retailer handed out big raises in an attempt to head off organizing and get a feel-good story in the news.

But the organizing committee saw an opportunity to call attention to an issue they knew their co-workers were already fired up about: cuts to hours. Retailers have a habit of giving with one hand while they’re taking with the other.

So the workers launched a petition calling on IKEA not to cut hours to pay for the raises. They gathered 8,000 signatures and delivered them at the company’s U.S. headquarters in Pennsylvania. This kept their organizing momentum going, and also drew media attention to their message.

In fact, the next time IKEA met with its European unions, the company had to field questions from reporters in Germany about cutting hours in the U.S.

Alan Hanson is the mobilization director for UFCW Local 400 in Washington, D.C. He got his start in the labor movement as a part-time unloader at UPS.

Do’s and Don’ts

In every organizing conversation, remember the fundamentals:

- » **It’s better to ask questions** than to give a lecture.
 - » **Be human.** Organizing conversations should be fluid, not mechanical. Make sure you hit the themes, but use your own words.
 - » **Don’t sugarcoat.** Organizing is hard and often scary. The best leaders act in spite of their fear. Be skeptical of people who say they’re unafraid; they probably aren’t prepared for the fight.
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