



Find a Friend

A workplace may be seriously unhealthy, but it's frequently only budgets, deadlines and margins in the must-do column for senior management. Dave Smith warns a solitary union rep quoting Hazards magazine is unlikely to change that. A lone voice is easy to ignore, particularly when the company board is more fixated on a healthy profit than a healthy workforce. It takes joined up action.

When it comes to organising around workplace health and safety, the key to success is recognising that unions are collective organisations. That means individual reps can't do it all on their own, we need support. But where to start?

My suggestion for new reps is to get a big piece of paper and draw a plan of the workplace divided into different departments.

Take retail workers. I have done a lot of work with the shopworkers' union Usdaw, organising in the major supermarket chains. The very large superstores employ up to 1,000 people, with a 24/7 shift pattern. A rep has to consider the aisles, warehouse, deli counter, bakery and tills but not forgetting the canteen, office, car park or security. Don't worry if it's not to scale – identifying the different sections, locations or shifts is the important bit.

Next, ask yourself two simple questions. What are the issues? And do I have any friends? What are the safety issues people working in each department complain about? If the rep works on checkout for example, common issues are lack of breaks, broken seats, RSI and abuse from customers.

We tend to know everything about areas we work in ourselves but much less about other parts of the business. Are there different issues affecting night shift workers in the warehouse? Blocked fire exits? Faulty roll-cages? Cold temperatures? What about the admin workers based in the office?

Then, work out who your friends are. Is there anyone in each department who is particularly sympathetic towards the union? Not just a union member, but someone who is always prepared to chat with the rep or who has raised concerns in the past. If you don't immediately know the answer, don't make it up, just leave it blank. Whenever safety reps try this for the first time, there are inevitably gaps in knowledge. Don't worry, that is the point of the exercise, to highlight where we need to do more work.

Over the next few weeks, wherever a gap exists, make a point of visiting that particular department or shift. Introduce yourself and get a few pointers about the ongoing health or safety concerns that only workers on that section would know about.

By patiently chatting with people over a period of time, the rep raises the profile of the union and it's likely that that will lead to them recruiting a few new members in the process. But it will also uncover workers' concerns. This means when reps talk to management in the future, they are talking about issues their members are really interested in.

Just as importantly, the process will identify a few people who are real allies. An informal network of union members a rep can discuss ideas with, who might be prepared to help out at a big staff meeting if the rep needs someone to back them up. Remember, it's easy for management to ignore one person, it's more difficult to ignore lots of people all making the same point.

In union organising, we call this process 'mapping'. If you were training to be an army officer at Sandhurst, they would call it reconnaissance. It's simple, it's non-confrontational but it really pays dividends in the long run. Give it a go.



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