

CASEWORKERS' STRESS

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Stress experienced as a direct or indirect result of work as a union rep is often “the stressor that dare not speak its name”. It is acknowledged and discussed relatively infrequently in contexts which bring reps together – the TUC ‘Union Reps’ bulletin board, for example, or Unionlearn’s training courses for activists.

In planning this workshop we began from the premise that stewarding can be a stressful experience, and that many reps have found themselves becoming burned out or overloaded by high and often unreasonable expectations, over-identification with casework, and the demands of members and managers. In preparation for the workshop we issued a questionnaire to reps at various union conferences and events. A good number of replies were received, with some respondents going into considerable detail about the stress experienced in their role. We had asked for constructive suggestions as to how, in retrospect, the situation could have been made less stressful through interventions by parties involved – chiefly, the union, the members, management and, not least, by the reps themselves. The material we had collected was especially valuable in that it enabled us to write four case studies for use as workshop activities. Though all responses were anonymised and the case study characters given fictitious identities, the subject matter was therefore very much “real life”. We found that workshop participants identified very strongly with these case studies and the problems they described.

Our main challenge in this workshop was one which we acknowledged to delegates at the start of each session – not to have them go away feeling worse about themselves and their union work than when they arrived! To this end, we presented the sessions as an opportunity to unload and identify the stressors of activism. This was done through a “First Thoughts” plenary session and then, through discussion on the case studies and sharing good practice, aiming to compile and share a “What Works” toolkit for surviving caseworkers’ stress.

The stories of our fictional reps, Jo, Julie, Mike and Pete, form part of this report. In each case, participants were asked to identify the possible stress points. We found that, while some of these were obvious, others of no less significance only became apparent after discussion and reflection. We then asked: “What could be done to help this situation by....the union? The employer? The members involved? The rep themselves?”

The discussions which ensued were lively and productive, leading to a range of thought-provoking suggestions to include in the toolkit. We shall be carrying out further analysis of the material and including it in a longer piece of work, to be made available in 2011. In the meantime, visitors to the Network website who read this report might like to reflect for themselves on the case studies and their own possible strategies for coping with the situations they describe.

We must express our thanks and appreciation to the workshop members. The best prepared sessions are of little value if participants don’t commit themselves to the task, and we could have no complaints on this score. Even on day 1 of conference, when further heavy snow looked imminent and we had only four delegates in the session, the quality of discussion and collaboration fully justified our decision not to cancel. The Sunday morning session was better attended and produced some lively debate. We have some complex and interesting material as a foundation for further research into the stressor that, at this conference, did speak its name, and articulated it very clearly!