

There for others

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When laboratory technologist John Bhullar was first asked to consider taking over the work of a retired steward, he thought he wasn't up for the job.

"I preferred to be in the background," he said. Besides, with over 1000 members from a wide range of professions, stewards at Vancouver's Children's Hospital had a huge responsibility. Dorrit Hansen, the outgoing steward, had done the work for years, and had an impressive knowledge of the collective agreement.

"But once it was obvious that she was actually going to retire, I kinda picked up the work. I thought, you know, she was there for me every time I had an issue. Maybe I should be there for others."

That was three years ago. Looking back now, Bhullar admits being a steward is a lot of work, but says he loves helping fellow members and making sure the collective agreement is being followed. To him, a steward isn't just the person you go to when you have a problem. It's the person who helps connect members to each other, and motivate them to work together to make their workplace, and their union, better.

"Come talk to me if you have a problem," he says. "But if you want to grab a coffee, or if you just want to talk, come see me. We're colleagues."

There have been plenty of challenges. Diversity of professions, for example.

"We have a lot of unique professions here. There may not be many of them, but their questions are just as

important as anyone else's, but it's a very steep learning curve just figuring out what is involved in their work. As you can imagine, if you go into a meeting and you have no clue what that member does, you might as well not go. You have to educate yourself, and that takes a lot of time and effort."

But the number one challenge is getting people to be stewards.

"People already have a lot of responsibilities with their jobs. And getting time off for stewards is hard. The employer often doesn't have enough staff, so we really have to push to get that time."

"It comes down to getting people engaged," says Bhullar, and in this, he's guided by the example of his mentor.

"Doritt listened to you," he says. "And she was a great organizer because she taught me that the union isn't some other people out there - it's you, and it's me."

Many members, especially newer ones, have little contact with the union unless they have a problem. That means they don't really know what HSA is, what it stands for, and how it makes decisions.

"Today for example somebody came to me, asked me a question, and I said sure I can help you, let's look at the collective agreement, and as soon as I sat down it was clear that she had never even seen that book. And I thought, oh boy."

Bhullar uses his role as steward to try to bridge that gap.

"Once they realize that THEY are the union, they'll get engaged and help their colleagues. So what I usually do is target a profession once a month. Last month I decided I was going to meet as many genetic counsellors as I could. So I met with one, asked her who her colleagues were, and then I met with them. In each case I told them who I was, what HSA was all about, and asked them if they had a copy of their agreement. I made HSA more visible, and more and more members are getting active."

Bhullar now has a small team of active stewards helping out. It's a good start, but he'd like to do more.

"I would love to do more education days. It's a lot of work, but it's gone very well. We just set up a pension seminar, and it's taking off like crazy. I have to look for a bigger room now."
He'd also like to see more time off to allow stewards to lead more HSA events at the worksite.

"Not everyone has the time or ability to get out to the main office in New Westminster. For example, we recently brainstormed about ways to get more stewards, and decided to set up an HSA table at lunch for a few days. We invited Val Avery to participate, and oh boy, were we surprised by the turnout. I can tell you that all the stuff HSA provided to us to give away, we had nothing left after the first hour. So many people turned out. Now everyone is asking, hey, when are we going to do that again?"

"The support we've been getting from the union has been incredible. It's so important to see our president clear her schedule and come out to meet with our members. She's shown them so much enthusiasm and respect, and people really appreciate that."

"The labour relations staff has been very good too. Sometimes I interact with five or six of them when dealing with a single issue, and they are very good at getting me what I need to help a member."

After three years as a steward, Bhullar has big plans for bigger and better activities. And some advice for those who think they can't do the job.

"I just want to say, have confidence in yourself. And have confidence in your union, because they'll be there to support you."

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