



Reasons Employees Give For Joining A Union

Insights

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We all know that union membership has been on the decline for decades. But with a new administration in the White House, and Democrat majorities in the House and Senate, employers should expect significant labor law reforms and dramatically different enforcement strategies that will make it easier for labor unions to organize employees. In fact, hopeful labor leaders proclaim that the expected changes could add up to 1.5 million new members per year for the next 15 years.

With the seemingly inevitable surge in union organizing upcoming, many businesses have already begun to point fingers at politicians, unions, and employees. Few stop to remember that the primary reason an employee joins a union is because of the employer's bad practices.

Historically, unions are most successful where employers send the message that they "don't care" about their employees. Allowing employees to work in unsafe conditions, not addressing or resolving employee concerns, showing favoritism, and making employment decisions that are perceived as unfair can leave your company susceptible to an organizing campaign.

With that in mind, let's take a look at why employees join unions, and what you might do to convince them otherwise. There are lots of reasons. Here are five that we see most often.

Reason Number 5: Ignoring employee complaints

You don't like to be ignored. Neither do your employees. When you overlook employee complaints, and especially claims of discrimination and payroll concerns, or fail to resolve them quickly and efficiently, resentment grows. Give employees orders without explanations, or ask them to perform jobs that they are not suited to do, and they begin to feel more like a number, as opposed to a valuable member of a productive team.

Unions know this. Indeed, one of the key promises made in every union campaign is to provide employees a "stronger voice on the job." To the underappreciated employee, this can be an attractive selling point.

You need an effective complaint-handling system – one that gives you employee feedback on a regular basis. Periodic group meetings and mini-surveys are good places to start. That way, if a union starts promising your employees a "voice" in the workplace, they'll understand that they

already have opportunities to be heard, and they'll more likely conclude that they don't need to pay a union representative for that privilege.

And keep this in mind: if you shut down employee complaints, you're not getting the benefit of their ideas and suggestions either.

Reason Number 4: Lack of respect

It goes without saying that, just as employees do not like being ignored, they also do not like being disrespected. Disciplining employees in front of others, assigning blame before reviewing the facts, and generally playing favorites are all factors that can cause employees to feel disrespected, and turn to a union for help.

To counter this, ensure that your supervisors are well-trained on effectively communicating with employees, especially about sensitive subjects like discipline or job performance. Helping managers become better leaders and advocates for their employees makes the managers better "caretakers" of employees and reduces employee vulnerability to the traditional union sales pitch.

Actually, the Golden Rule about treating others the way you'd like to be treated, is a pretty good business model for your supervisors to follow with their employees.

Reason Number 3: Lack of concern about safety

Employees expect to work in a safe environment. They expect safety training, appropriate equipment, and clear guidelines and procedures for responding to and reporting workplace accidents. Too often, employers fail to meet these basic expectations. Not only does this leave your organization susceptible to potential OSHA citations, it also opens the door to a union-organizing campaign.

Workplace safety has historically been a focal point for unions. Unions promote themselves as being able to secure more safety training, resulting in fewer workplace accidents. They advertise that they are able to walk employees through the sometimes complicated workers' compensation procedures.

Employers who address safety issues early on are therefore better suited to counter the inevitable union promise to create a "safer" workplace. This begins with management and supervisor safety training. Remember, safety is not simply a book of rules and regulations, but a culture of smart behavior that needs to be encouraged from the top down. Employers who actively promote a safe work environment will not only find that they are well prepared for a union campaign, but also that they have protected themselves from costly OSHA citations, and created a more productive business environment.

Reason Number 2: Non-competitive pay and benefits

The bottom line in an organizing drive often comes down to wages and benefits. Unions argue consistently that representation leads to higher wages, better health care, and a secure retirement.

The "union advantage," employees are told, will put more money in their pockets.

That's not necessarily true, of course, and in fact it's sometimes the reverse. But perception can become reality and if your employees believe that your organization is easily capable of providing more but just chooses not to, they are easy union targets.

Employers who provide fair and competitive wages and benefits are less susceptible to this argument. Employees talk to their friends and neighbors at competing businesses and learn quickly if they are being paid less than others. To the extent that employees feel they are earning less, they will be more likely to believe that the union can get them more.

Participate in wage-benefit surveys where you can and make sure you are competitive in your industry and your location. If your position in the community is not at the top of the scale, be prepared to explain why, including the trade-offs of the other non-monetary advantages of working at your company, which employees may not always focus on. The more honest you are with your employees the more likely they are to believe you when you explain that a union is not the answer to their concerns.

The Number One Reason You Can't Blame Employees for Joining a Union: Favoritism

As should be obvious by now, the number one reason employees join a union is because they feel their employer is treating them "unfairly." That can mean lots of different things, but nowhere is it more evident than when an employer takes inconsistent disciplinary action. Where employees feel that they have been subjected to discipline which they did not deserve, or did not expect, or that another employee got a break that they did not, union organizing may not be far off.

The solution here is a simple one: establish clear policies and regulations and follow them. Too often, employers satisfy the first step, but fail to meet the second. You also need to train and update managers and supervisors on employment policies, and make sure that they are being implemented effectively and consistently.

To sum it up: a good pro-employee management style is also a good way to stay union free. Employers that take this approach will: 1) prove to employees that their employer cares about them; 2) improve working conditions before the threat of union organizing arises; 3) detect issues that could be exploited by unions; and 4) provide an established mechanism for implementing pro-employee practices and responding credibly to any imminent organizing threat.

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