

## Activity 9. Workplace education scenarios

### Objectives

Practice responding to typical challenges in workplace education programs.

Identify teacher, union and employer roles in workplace education scenarios.



### What you need

- **Flip chart paper, magic markers and masking tape** for small group work, and to record people's ideas during whole-group discussion.
- **Handout 13.** Workplace education scenarios [#1-#8].
- **Labor-Management Setting Handouts 14, 15 and 17**, if appropriate.

### What you do

- Divide participants into small groups. Give copies of one scenario to each group. Explain that the scenarios depict typical situations in workplace education programs, at unionized and non-unionized work sites. Groups will discuss how they might respond to these situations, using scenario questions to guide their work:
  - What issues surface in this scenario?
  - What is your experience with situations like this? How have you handled them?
  - Why might this situation have happened? What might have caused it?
  - How could the education provider respond to this situation? What are some possible ways to handle this situation?
  - What roles might the education provider play here? What is the union's role? Management's role? For non-unionized work sites, what are the options? If the work site were unionized, how might the situation be different?
  - How could you prevent something like this from happening?
- Ask groups to summarize their ideas on flip chart paper.
- Ask groups to report on their work to the whole group. Invite everyone to comment and add their own ideas for each scenario. Write any main ideas on flip chart paper.
- Give people Labor-Management Setting Handouts 14, 15 and 17, if appropriate, and review them with the group.

## Facilitator notes

**Activity tips.** Participants will interpret scenarios differently and come up with a variety of responses. There's no one correct 'solution' for each scenario. It is important, however, that people discuss how lack of union involvement, or no union presence at all, affects these situations. Take a look at the notes below for key ideas. If you're going to do Labor-Management Setting Activity 7, you can save Handouts 14 and 15 for then, or use them now if you like.

You can use situations participants have faced in addition to, or instead of, the activity scenarios. If you're only using the Overview section of this training, you can use scenarios from other sections as well. You can have people create skits in response to scenarios. (There are skit directions for WNA, Labor-Management Setting and Classroom scenarios). In some cases, it might be useful to have all groups work on one scenario and compare groups' ideas.

**In scenario 1,** workers are suspicious of being interviewed for a needs analysis and don't want to sign up. Except for getting the union to sign on to the proposal, the employer has left the union out of the picture. In your whole-group discussion, make sure to include the idea that if management tries to control the program and doesn't include the union, workers and the union have good reason to be suspicious of management's goals for the program. Workers may fear the employer is setting up the program to 'weed out' workers or determine who will get promoted or laid off when new systems are introduced. In this case, the union should push for an equal say in program development. The education provider can help advocate for union involvement. If the union had to sign on to the proposal, then perhaps the funder either encourages or requires union participation. The provider can use funding guidelines to advocate for union involvement.

**In scenario 2,** managers at a non-unionized company become suspicious of curriculum content and the teacher's motives. It's hard to say what the teacher could do in this situation. On her own, she may or may not be able to convince managers that workers need these topics as much as they need what management wants. It's unlikely that workers themselves will push for potentially 'controversial' topics if they know their employer disapproves. In your whole-group discussion, stress that at non-unionized work sites, the employer controls the show, and management's good will (or lack of it) determines what will happen in an education program. If the site were unionized, even though managers might still resist the curriculum, workers and the union would have the legal backing and power to push for their own agenda.

**In scenario 3,** managers at a unionized clinic refuse to include union content in the curriculum. However, they do ask for 'conflict resolution,' so there may

be labor-management tensions. The union lets this slide. It's the workers who start asking for union-related lessons in class, putting the teacher in a difficult situation. Perhaps she could go to the union representative and talk to her about advocating for union content, or at least get ideas of how to handle the situation in class. The teacher might involve students in talking to the union rep as well. The union may have to decide how much it wants to push this issue.

**In scenario 4**, workers at a non-unionized hospital refuse to take a test designed to determine who needs basic skills classes. There are at least a few key issues here. The standardized tests confuse some workers. Workers refuse to take the test because they fear how results might be used. Administrators are taking a quick-fix approach, planning and testing only a few months before training on the computerized system is going to start. As in scenario 2, it's unclear how much influence the provider could have here. The education provider has gone along with the employer's plan so far. Since it's backfiring, perhaps management will hear her suggestions. But without a union, the employer calls the shots. A union could push for different testing procedures and bargain around issues resulting from the new computerized system (changes in job descriptions and required training).

**In scenario 5**, the union hears about the employer's plans to start an education program after managers have already started the ball rolling. It's obvious that the union and management interpret the hotel workers' problems differently. It's good that the union has demanded to be included in the process. It's also clear that labor-management tensions around working conditions are very real. In this case, the provider could advocate for a program that addresses these conditions, but it may be up to the union to push for a reality-based curriculum.

**In scenario 6**, during a needs analysis an education provider interviews very discouraged, discontented workers who are planning to organize a union at their workplace. The employer, who invited the provider to conduct the needs analysis, said nothing about workers organizing a union. Managers may or may not be aware of organizing activities. They may or may not be planning to offer classes to placate workers or dampen organizing efforts. It is clear, however, that they hope an education program will improve morale and cure worker discontent. If workers are discussing their organizing efforts openly with the provider, this may mean that management knows about their efforts. But in any case, the provider should not report these efforts to the employer. Such information should be treated confidentially. She can, however, report the main issues and problems workers feel they are facing. It's unlikely, though, that offering workplace classes will fix many of these problems.

**In scenario 7**, a successful labor-management workplace education program, as well as students' livelihoods, are threatened by sweeping lay offs. Even though the union is strong, if the hospital is facing a real financial crisis, it's unlikely that the union can prevent layoffs from happening. What the union contract can do is make sure that lay offs happen fairly, according to contract rules (by seniority, with proper advance notice). To support the education program and workers, perhaps the committee could consider letting laid off workers continue to participate in classes through the end of the cycle, or until they find other jobs. The teacher and students might develop curriculum around lay off issues and rights.

**In scenario 8**, supervisors at a non-unionized factory are ignoring student placement policies set up for the workplace education program. Also, some supervisors are not releasing workers to attend classes, even though this has been agreed to. In addition, some workers have refused to take the placement test because they fear supervisors will use it against them. Perhaps some supervisors are unaware of the policies, or were not consulted about how classes would affect department work. Perhaps managers and the provider never agreed to keep assessments confidential, or did not communicate this to workers. The provider can advocate for including supervisors in a committee and establishing a confidentiality policy. But without a union, the education provider must rely on managers' good will to get workers released or keep test scores private. A union would have the power hold the employer to such agreements, but the provider doesn't.

*"Union and management need to know what the challenges are for students. There is a lot of discrimination going on at the work site. A lot of students just want to get out of there and get better jobs. There are a lot of problems all related to upper management. If management knew what was said in class..."*

— Workplace Educator