

A hard job, but it needn't be stressful



William H. Young

The job of a letter carrier is a hard job, physically and mentally demanding. You know it; management knows it; and certainly interest arbitrator George Fleischli understood this in September of 1999 when he “upgraded” letter carriers to what was then Grade 6 and is now City Carrier Grade 1.

I wish I could wave a magic wand that would make your job easier in the future, but you know I can't do that. In fact, with the Postal Service's competitors such as United Parcel Service nipping at our heels and electronic mail and electronic commerce replacing more and more high-revenue first-class mail, the Postal Service obviously will have to become leaner and more efficient if it is to survive.

But this doesn't mean it has to become meaner.

So if this union cannot turn a difficult job into an easy one, what we can do is make the job less stressful.

No, we're not going to close the door on new technologies the Service needs to deploy if it is to compete successfully. Nor are we going to refuse to discuss with the Service better ways for letter carriers to serve their customers. But we are going to work to relieve the stress that too often makes your job more than just hard but also a major hassle.

It's no secret what's happening in too many places: Autocratic managers trying to push carriers to perform beyond their physical capacities. Daily disputes about overtime, who gets to work it and who doesn't. Unfair or contractually flawed route adjustments. Repeated contract violations by management, leading to grievances, disputes over these grievances and a continuous cycle of hostility between branch officers and workroom floor supervisors.

Of course when tensions boil over on the workroom floor, management may not be solely responsible. Some of our stewards and local officers have fought management so long, they don't know how to lower their voices. They too will have to change their behavior if our joint effort to make your jobs less stressful is to be successful.

But no matter who is to blame for hostilities at any given workplace, I am committed to

changing the environment on the workroom floor to make the job of a letter carrier a far less stressful one. Again, not an easy job, but a less stressful one.

We have already established a joint Intervention Task Force designed to identify troubled post offices and intervene to change the climate, helping the local parties resolve their differences quickly and with as little acrimony as possible. The Task Force's work is just beginning (described on page 5 of this magazine), but both parties are committed to its success.

Another task force, also discussed on page 5, will be looking at how we evaluate and adjust our routes to see if NALC and the Postal Service can develop a joint route inspection and adjustment process. Because your attitudes toward management are shaped in a major way by whether you believe your route adjustment is fair, you want fair evaluations conducted without confrontations. And, to look at this from management's perspective for a moment, even the most enlightened supervisor will turn sour if he or she thinks you're trying to cut corners and give the Postal Service less than a fair day's work.

It's far too early to tell how successful these task forces will be. I am confident, however, that they can and will improve the workplace climate. Of course, if all else fails, this union is fortunate to have the Joint Statement on Violence and Behavior to rely upon. But as much satisfaction as we feel when we learn that an arbitrator, relying on the Joint Statement, relieved a manager of his or her supervisory duties (or, in one case, terminated the manager), the Joint Statement can have unintended consequences since its successful use can also breed resentment on the part of management and thus produce a new round of workplace tensions.

In the end, the Service must make a giant-size commitment to change the behavior of its managers, and I am working to get that message through to top management.

This is part of my commitment to making your job a better one, not an easy job but certainly a less stressful one.

Ben-gay, maybe. Roloids, no!

