

Step B training



**Jamie
Lumm**

Like deer in the headlights. That's what the 40 management and union representatives sitting nervously in their seats look like to me. It's Monday morning, and we are about to begin another joint NALC/USPS Step B certification training class. Having sat in this same class as a student 16 years ago, I know what most of these students are feeling: eager to learn new concepts and ideas, curious about this process, and of course anxious about whether they will pass the class. They are aware, or soon will be, that they will be working 12 to 14 hours each of the next four days studying the contract and learning how to write Step B decisions. If they meet certain benchmarks and make it to Friday, they will

take a final exam that they must pass with an 80 percent score to be certified.

Each DRT certification class is made up of 20 union and 20 management candidates who are paired up at the beginning of the week to act as Step B teams. The NALC students are selected by NALC President Fred Rolando from names submitted by the national business agents. Most are shop stewards or branch officers with extensive grievance-handling experience at the Informal and Formal Step A levels who have exhibited good writing skills and an ability to work with management in a professional manner. Management's candidates are selected by the district manager and the area managers of labor relations.

The training is held several times a year, depending on need, at the USPS' Bolger Training Center in Potomac, MD. The faculty consists of six union and six management trainers. The management trainers are USPS headquarters or area labor relations officials with years of experience working with the NALC. Each class, I have the privilege of working with NALC staff member Sue Wellhausen, affectionately known as "Mama DRT" to the 58 Step B teams in the field, and Steve Hanna, a long-term Step B team member and our computer training expert. The other three slots are filled on a rotating basis by RAAs Troy Fredenburg and Ray Tillman, and current Step B Team members Robbie Gardiner, Chuck Page, Jeff Fox, Kathy Purdy, Lynne Pendleton and Christine Smith. They are all expert instructors as well as successful Step B team members.

The union and management facilitators are paired up and assigned to a specific group of eight students whom they work with throughout the week, providing critical feedback and assistance. The facilitator pairs also co-teach the presentations that occur during the week and provide individual instruction for those students who need extra help.

The week begins with a contractual "pre-test," which for many students is a wake-up call that they are going to need to study to pass the course. To that end, it sets the tone for the week: This is serious stuff—and if you don't take it seriously, you won't be certified. This is further emphasized by President Rolando and USPS Vice President of Labor Relations Doug Tulino, or their respective designees, who address the class about the principles behind the Dispute Resolution Process and the importance of their roles as Step B team members.

Following a review of the of the grievance procedure and the duties and responsibilities of Step B teams, the students go to the computer lab for a class on using a computer to research contractual issues and on copying and pasting relevant information into Step B decisions. This is crucial, as the rest of the week mostly follows this pattern: A pair of facilitators present a brief review of a particular article or contractual issue, then the students are given a grievance file related to that issue.

They must review the file, come to a joint decision as to whether there is a contract violation, and if there is, agree on what is to be done. The students then individually write clear, concise and educational Step B decisions explaining what happened to cause the dispute, what the local union and management positions were regarding the grievance, what the team decided and why. The facilitators review and critique their work, often having the students re-write them several times until they are acceptable. The various issues covered include holiday scheduling, stewards' rights, maximization, CCA scheduling, past practice, opting and discipline. In addition, the student pairs are assigned an Article 8 overtime case that they must work on together and by Thursday afternoon, they must have completed a joint decision that is contractually correct and error-free. Students are often seen in the computer lab working very late into the evening.

Not every student completes the class. Some have been sent home early because they have shown an inability to work with their counterpart or have other attitude issues. Some have not been able to improve their writing or computer skills to the point where the facilitators feel confident that they would be a benefit to the Step B team. If the student demonstrates sufficient computer and writing skills and is able to work with his or her counterpart, he or she is allowed to take the final exam on Friday morning. A score of 80 percent or above is required to pass the exam and be certified as Step B representative. About 10 percent to 12 percent of those who take the exam do not pass it.

It's not easy telling someone who has worked and studied hard all week that he or she won't be certified. Some take it pretty hard; others seem relieved. But these decisions have to be made to maintain the integrity and credibility of the process and to ensure that the individual has the knowledge and skills necessary to be successful at Step B.