

Who are those guys?



**Jamie
Lumm**

Have you ever read a Step B decision and wondered, “Who are those guys? How did they get this job?” Well, here’s the answer:

The grievance procedure outlined in Article 15 of our National Agreement is designed to resolve disputes at the lowest possible level. To that end, grievances are first discussed at Informal A between the supervisor and shop steward (and/or grievant). If they are unable to resolve it, the union can appeal the case to the next level called Formal A, where the grievance is discussed between the branch president and the installation head or their designees. If they are unable to resolve the case, the union can appeal it to the Step B Dispute Resolution Team (DRT).

The Step B DRT is comprised of one USPS and one NALC representative. They are tasked with jointly reviewing the grievance file that is appealed to them and making a good-faith effort to resolve the grievance based on the National Agreement and the *Joint Contract Administration Manual (JCAM)*. If the file lacks sufficient information for the team to make a decision, they can remand it to the local parties for further development or, if they are unable to resolve it, declare an impasse. The national business agent (NBA) then has 14 days to appeal the impasse to arbitration. No matter what they decide, the team must write a joint decision explaining how they reached that conclusion.

There are 58 full-time teams across the country, each having backup teams that can be called up to cover absences or help with the workload. Each party chooses its own representatives for the teams. The names of NALC candidates are submitted by NBAs and are selected by President Rolando. USPS candidates are submitted by the districts to the area manager of labor relations (AMLR) and forwarded to USPS headquarters. Then 20 union and 20 management candidates are selected for each week-long training class, which are held two to three times a year at the Bolger Conference Center in Potomac, MD.

The training is conducted by a joint USPS-NALC faculty consisting of six facilitators from each. The NALC facilitators are current or former Step B representatives, including myself, Sue Wellhausen and Greg Dixon, who work at NALC headquarters. Other NALC facilitators who currently serve on Step B teams are: Anthony Ali of Central Florida Branch 1091; Jeff Fox of New Jersey Merged Branch 38; Robbie Gardiner of Fort Wayne, IN Branch 116; Steve Hanna of York, PA Branch 509; Anita Lewallen of Conway, AR Branch 1592; and Warren Wehmas of St. Paul Branch 28. Management’s facilitators are headquarters and area labor relations specialists.

To become Step B representatives, candidates must be able to demonstrate the ability to work cooperatively with their counterparts; use a computer to research subjects; and write clear, educational and contractually correct decisions. If they meet these criteria, they are allowed to take the final exam, where they must demonstrate they have sufficient contractual knowledge to do the job. It is not an easy course. In every class, some candidates are sent home before the final exam. In every class, some candidates do not pass the final exam.

The training is quite intense, as there are only a few days to determine whether the candidate has what it takes. On Monday, the candidates are given a pre-test to assess their contractual knowledge and to indicate to the facilitators who is likely to need extra help. It also serves as a wake-up call to those who think they know more than they actually do.

After the pre-test, the candidates learn about the grievance procedure and the role the Step B team plays in it. Students then go to the computer lab and are taught how to research specific subjects and to copy information from handbooks, manuals and documents and paste it into a Step B decision. These are essential components of the Step B writing process.

Over the next few days, the facilitators, working in USPS-NALC pairs, make a series of presentations on some of the most grieved subjects, including discipline, overtime assignment and distribution, holiday scheduling, steward rights, regular and CCA scheduling, past practice, and opting and bidding. Following each presentation, students receive a case file concerning the topic just covered that they must review, discuss and resolve with their partner. They then must each separately write a Step B decision on that case.

The facilitators review and critique their decisions for correctness, content, grammar and clarity. Most students’ initial drafts require a lot of editing, but by Thursday afternoon, most of the students’ writing has improved. Although class officially ends at 5 p.m., many students spend their evenings working on their writing or in study groups preparing for the final. The facilitators meet every evening to discuss each student’s progress and ways to help them improve and work with them after hours.

In addition to the contractual presentations, the students are taught about effective communication, time management and handling ethical issues. The oft-repeated phrase instilled in each candidate is, “Do the right thing.”

Those who survive until Friday take a final exam, which evaluates each student’s contractual knowledge and their ability to absorb, retain and recall information. Students must score 80 percent or better to pass the test and be certified.

Students who successfully complete the course are worked into their local Step B Team as needed. Some become primary team members right away; others may serve as backups for a period of time and eventually become full time. The teams report to their NBA and AMLR who jointly manage the team, including reviewing each Step B decision for contractual correctness and clarity.

So now you know.