

Management sinks the safety ambassador ship



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April 15 marks 106 years since the *RMS Titanic* sunk during her maiden voyage. It was a tragedy that, by most accounts, could have been avoided. The subject I am going to write about this month is not as big a story, but is tragic nonetheless.

As background, many offices around the country have a locally developed (not from USPS Headquarters) safety awareness initiative called the Safety Captain Program. This joint program has been around for many years. The Safety Captain Program takes a “peer on peer” approach to safety awareness. This program is built on two important principles:

1. The “Golden Rule” is that no observations made and/or recorded by safety captains can be used for disciplinary purposes.
2. NALC chooses the NALC safety captains.

“The questions/concerns we raised were designed to see whether the proposed Safety Ambassador Program is really going to be based on the Safety Captain Program, as advertised.”

USPS sent us an Article 19 notice last October. (An Article 19 notice generally means USPS believes that what it is doing affects wages, hours or working conditions.) Safety is not normally my area, but I was assigned to represent NALC in this matter because of the Article 19 notification. This correspondence announced that the Postal Service had decided to “establish national guidelines for the existing Safety Captain Program and rebrand it as, Safety Ambassador Program.”

The notice stated that the purpose of the proposed Safety Ambassador Program “is to design a standardized safety program based on the existing and locally developed Safety Captain Program.”

We set up a meeting with USPS in November to discuss the matter. The meeting seemed to go well. The USPS official we met with said almost all the right things. When we left the meeting, I thought that the only issue left to resolve was how to select safety ambassadors in offices that do not currently have a safety captain program.

We prepared written questions/concerns regarding the proposed Safety Ambassador Program, as is customary with many Article 19 notifications. We also offered a suggestion about how to select safety ambassadors in offices with no Safety Captain Program. The questions/concerns we raised were designed to see whether the proposed Safety Ambassador Program is really going to be based on the Safety Captain Program, as advertised.

One thing is for sure: We got an answer. USPS responded in early February to our communication. Here are some of the NALC questions/concerns and the USPS responses:

1. Is participation as a safety ambassador voluntary?

Response: Yes.

This says to me that, if participating in their Safety Ambassador Program by serving as safety ambassadors would be beneficial to our members, then we should participate. But if it turns out it would not benefit our members (as is true here), then we should not volunteer to become a safety ambassador.

2. Will the Safety Ambassador Program change any current NALC rights under the National Agreement?

Response: No.

We can enforce our contractual rights related to safety through the grievance procedure.

3. Will observations made and/or recorded by safety ambassadors be used for disciplinary purposes?

Response: Not directly. However, the Postal Service retains the right to conduct its own investigation into the observations made and/or recorded by safety ambassadors.

That is a fancy way to say “yes”—and that is the wrong answer if you want us to be safety ambassadors. It is great to want to help everyone work safely and avoid accidents, but who wants to be involved in getting our peers in trouble? That just cuts the heart out of any notion that the Safety Ambassador Program is based on the Safety Captain Program.

4. Will any other activities performed by safety ambassadors be used for disciplinary purposes?

Response: We understand this question concerns activities that the safety ambassador is assigned to by management. Based on that understanding our response is the same as provided in No. 3 above.

This is one place where I can agree with USPS. Same as provided in No. 3 above.

5. Will current NALC safety captains who volunteer to serve as NALC safety ambassadors be permitted to continue embracing safety values by being appointed to this position?

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Response: Safety captains who volunteer to serve as safety ambassadors will be subject to the selection method for safety ambassadors.

This is such a disrespectful answer. It is a complete insult to all of our current safety captains who, by the way, built and maintained the Safety Captain Program for all these years. I really thought this was one of those questions people describe as a “no-brainer.” I do not know about you, but they lost me at Question No. 3. This answer should seal the deal for anyone who was not gone already.

6. In those delivery units where a Safety Captain Program has been established, will the current selection process be continued?

Response: The Postal Service intends to select safety ambassadors for each craft from a pool of volunteers and recommended candidates provided by the unions, with the installation head making the final selection. Further, the Postal Service intends to replace the Safety Captain Program with the Safety Ambassador Program; however, an employee who is currently serving as a safety captain will have the opportunity to become a safety ambassador.

That is a no.

After receiving the USPS response and considering the matter, I decided to hold off on releasing their responses and asked for another meeting. We met again in mid-February. I explained to USPS representatives that we would like to get on board with their Safety Ambassador Program, but this ship is going to have to sail without NALC in its current form. They did not reconsider their responses to our questions/concerns/suggestions.

I sent a letter to USPS stating our position regarding the proposed Safety Ambassador Program as follows:

This follows your letter dated October 12, 2017 notifying the NALC the Postal Service proposes to establish national guidelines for the existing Safety Captain Program and re-brand it as, Safety Ambassador Program.

Your letter stated the purpose of the proposed Safety Ambassador Program “is to design a standardized safety program based on the existing and locally developed Safety Captain Program.”

As you know, the NALC submitted a list of questions/concerns regarding the proposed Safety Ambassador Program on December 8, 2017 and later added a suggestion for selection of NALC Safety Ambassadors in offices that did not already have a Safety Captain Program.

Thank you for your response letter dated February 2, 2018 that addressed NALC’s questions/concerns and suggestion concerning the proposed Safety Ambassador Program.

Unfortunately, based on the answers you provided, it is clear that the proposed Safety Ambassador Program prin-

ciples are not based on the existing and locally developed Safety Captain Program as stated in your October 12, 2017 letter.

For instance, observations made and/or recorded by Safety Captains could not be used for disciplinary purposes under any circumstances. Based on your answer to this concern, this will no longer be true for Safety Ambassadors. This destroys the integrity of the “peer on peer” safety awareness approach that is at the heart of the Safety Captain Program.

Additionally, the Safety Captain Program is a joint program where the NALC chooses our representatives that serve as Safety Captains. The proposed Safety Ambassador Program is a unilateral program. According to your answers, current Safety Captains will only be permitted to serve as Safety Ambassadors if the installation head appoints them to serve in this capacity. The installation head will also choose the NALC Safety Ambassadors in offices that do not currently have the Safety Captain Program.

It is for these reasons the NALC is not in a position to participate in the proposed Safety Ambassador Program in its current form.

We will continue to promote safety values and initiatives through the existing joint committees provided for in the National Agreement and look forward to working with you through that process.

“We will get on another boat and let USPS sink the RMS Safety Ambassador on its maiden voyage.”

Unfortunately, we have no choice but to advise all NALC activists to not volunteer to serve as safety ambassadors for the Safety Ambassador Program in its current form. Just say no when the opportunity to become a safety ambassador presents itself.

I cannot speak for the other unions, but I would be surprised if any of them come out in support of the Safety Ambassador Program. I am sure each union will respond in its own way.

We decided to file a national grievance on this issue because we believe the creation of the unilateral Safety Ambassador Program to replace the joint Safety Captain Program creates changes in working conditions that are not fair, reasonable or equitable.

We will get on another boat and let USPS sink the *RMS Safety Ambassador* on its maiden voyage. What’s that old saying? Those who do not learn from the past are doomed to repeat it.