

Christopher Columbus and the DRP



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Christopher Columbus set sail from Spain on Aug. 3, 1492, and headed west. His plan was to discover a passage to the East Indies in southeast Asia, where the riches of gold, pearls and the lucrative spice trade industry awaited. Instead of reaching his intended destination, he reached land somewhere in the Bahamas on Oct. 12, 1492, and is credited with discovering the Americas.

The NALC and USPS set out on a joint venture on June 26, 2002, when we agreed to exchange our old grievance procedure with the Dispute Resolution Process (DRP). Our plan was to create a system where repetitive grievances would be a thing of the past. The original intent was for Step B decisions to

be issued using the *Joint Contract Administration Manual (JCAM)*; these decisions would give the local parties direction on resolving future disputes involving the same situation. The theory was that Step B teams would literally work themselves out of a job.

An agreement was signed by our national president and the postmaster general in July 2003 and titled “USPS-NALC Joint Statement of Expectations.” This was the map drawn by the leaders of NALC and USPS to direct the parties at all levels of the Postal Service on how to reach our intended destination. Coincidentally, this agreement received the number M-01492 in the Material Reference System (MRS), and states:

The parties at the national level commit to the following principles of conduct when addressing disputes under Article 15 of the National Agreement. We believe these principles are essential to the effectiveness of any dispute resolution process as well as effective working relationships between the union and management. Our expectation is that these principles will guide union and management representatives at all levels of the organization.

We will do our best to understand and respect each other’s roles, responsibilities, interests and challenges.

- We will make every effort to establish and maintain a more constructive and cooperative working relationship between union and management at all levels of the organization by promoting integrity, professionalism and fairness in our dealings with each other.
- We are committed to honoring our labor contract and the specific rights and responsibilities of the parties set forth therein.

- We will work together to prevent contract violations through communication, training and good faith efforts to anticipate workplace problems and resolve disputes in a timely manner.
- We are committed to eliminating abuses of our grievance-arbitration procedure, such as the filing of unwarranted grievances to clog the system or a refusal to resolve grievances even where there are no legitimate differences of opinion between the parties.
- We are committed to mutual and joint efforts to improve the workplace environment and to improve the overall performance of the Postal Service.
- We will make every effort to resolve our disputes in a professional manner and to avoid any unnecessary escalation of disputes which may adversely impact adherence to the above principles or adversely influence union-management relationships at other levels of the organization.

Over the next several years, we had national joint meetings where we brought all the Step B teams in for a few days each year to continue promoting the principles referenced above. The area/regional counterparts also made sure that annual joint training sessions were conducted at the local level in most places around the country to further reinforce these principles and ensure that any new players received joint training in the process.

Management stopped participating in these types of efforts about a decade ago. The “Operations” arm of the USPS has gained more and more control over the situation over time. The Operations folks call and run all the plays for USPS, while their Labor Relations arm is left to clean up the messes they make. One does not have to look any further than the latest USPS train wreck they call the consolidated casing initiative to see what I am talking about.

Like Columbus, USPS has gotten way off course from our intended destination. Local supervisors and managers do not receive adequate contract training today, much less joint training on the DRP. They are simply not raised to respect the contractual rights of the letter carriers they manage, or the importance of compliance with grievance settlements. Instead of promoting contract and grievance settlement compliance, USPS’s Labor Relations arm is currently attempting to promote a misguided argument that insists that management has the right to violate the national agreement with impunity, and that NALC has no right to request and attain appropriate remedies.

Unlike Christopher Columbus, USPS is not going to accidentally stumble upon a new land by continuing its current course. Instead, it eventually will discover that it has sailed in a circle and ended up back in the old grievance procedure.

Anytime USPS decides it wants to resume our joint quest to achieve those noble principles set forth in M-01492, NALC stands ready and willing to sail.