

10 Issues on Labor's Future (July 18, 2005)

## **Unions Must Develop a Crop of Leaders Who Have Close Ties with Rank-and-File**

**By Harry Kelber**

*(The last of the series of ten articles)*

What kind of union leaders would most members like to have? Here's a list of attributes: They should be competent, experienced, well-informed, incorruptible, committed, reliable, good-humored, calm under pressure and respectful of member rights.

Add to that check list: They should be good communicators, in speech and in writing, smart strategists, experienced organizers, shrewd negotiators, effective administrators and clear-headed thinkers about labor's future.

A union election, provided it is open and fair to all candidates, is a good testing ground for would-be leaders. They will be judged not only by what they say, but how they say it. Their program for building the union and providing solutions to the problems the union faces will be closely scrutinized. They have to convince the membership that they are the best-qualified individuals to fill the elective positions. Of special importance will be the number and quality of their supporters.

There are, broadly speaking, two types of union leaders, who can be classified as Type A and Type B. Type A are the self-confident, take-charge leaders who see a union as a quasi-military institution with them in command and members who carry out orders. They make strategic decisions with a minimum of input from subordinates. They are task-oriented, assigning individuals to clearly-defined objectives and holding them accountable for their performance.

Type A leaders have a short attention span for people who offer them all sorts of advice and suggestions, especially if they conflict with their own views.

Type B are the democratic, group-oriented leaders. They prefer to consult their subordinates before advocating new policies and programs, striving wherever possible for approval by consensus. They believe that a group discussion of a problem can better evaluate all the options available to the union and arrive at much more effective decisions than if they rely solely on their own judgment.

Type B knows that if the members are well-informed and are given a role in decision-making, they will be more likely to respond favorably to a call for their support and participation during collective bargaining negotiations or demonstrations for pro-worker legislation.

The labor movement needs leaders who can skillfully blend Type A and Type B characteristics and techniques, depending on the circumstances that they are dealing with.

The AFL-CIO needs to organize a group of Leadership Training Schools, where qualified entrants can learn the variety of skills and knowledge that are required of today's leadership. The Organizing Institute, with its three-day training program, deals solely — and inadequately — with organizing. The George

Meany College offers a general degree in labor studies, but is not equipped for providing the very intensive training of union leaders.

To remedy the critical shortage of well-trained labor leaders, the AFL-CIO should set up training centers in four regions within the country and staff them with the best available instructors. The AFL-CIO cannot succeed in its goal of rebuilding the labor movement as a powerful force in the nation's economic and political life unless it develops an expanded corps of high quality leaders.

**This is the last of ten articles on “Ten Issues on Labor’s Future.”**

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