

FIRMS TOLD WHAT TO DO WHEN UNION KNOCKS

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Unions are coveting many South Florida industries' workforces, aided by a management attitude of "it can't happen to me."

That's the warning sounded by Dr. David J. Schwartz, chairman of the South Florida Manufacturers Association's Labor Relations Subcommittee, and Stephen Cabot, senior partner in a law firm that specializes in labor relations.

Schwartz and Cabot conducted a seminar recently for the SFMA on "What To Do When The Union Knocks." But, the two warn the industry that waits for the union to knock may have already waited too long.

"Our whole point is to make manufacturers aware of what they can do, legally and ethically to deal with labor-relations problems before the union knocks on the door," said Schwartz, president of The Management Consortium, a Fort Lauderdale consulting firm. Schwartz is quick to add that he's not anti-labor. He began his career as a union organizer.

"We can best illustrate the problem by taking the old real estate adage on the three words that make a successful builder: location, location, location," said Cabot, author of the book *Labor Management Relations Act Manual: A Guide to Effective Labor Relations*.

"Those three words for labor relations are: communication, communication, communication."

Schwartz and Cabot are in the business of representing the management side of labor relations, explaining how to avoid union and labor problems by improving management's relationship with employees.

South Florida is ripe for union organization, they say, because the unions are already strong in the populated Northeast, Midwest and West Coast industrial areas of the U.S. Florida's "right to work" law has lulled many employers into a false sense of security and the state's smaller companies are particularly ripe for unionization.

"If I were still a union organizer, I'd be in my car right now blanketing this area with union material," said Schwartz.

The disadvantages of a union shop from management perspective are many, including loss of control of the business, the inability of being able to deal with employees on a one-to-one basis, and declining productivity and efficiency, the speakers said.

What should the employer do if he's committed to non-union status?

"The best line of defense is getting their act together now, organize what they can do and say, before it's too late," said Schwartz. "The biggest mistake management makes is that they don't listen. The problem is that most companies, their managers, don't know how to communicate."

Most employers, it seems, are unaware of worker unrest due to such factors as working conditions, compensation, benefits or even job security. And management is too often surprised that the first evidence of unrest is presentation of a demand to hold a union election.

"Management generally underestimates, takes employees for granted," said Cabot. "You can't talk above the level of the employee, because he won't understand what you're saying and he'll resent it. You can't talk below them either. You have to talk at them, to them and through them."

The open-door policy contributes to less communication in many instances, Cabot added. The employer who says his door is always open to hear complaints assumes everything is okay when he doesn't hear complaints. But a low-level worker isn't going into the boss's office to detail what bugs him.

"Instead of being satisfied that it hears no grievances, the management should find a way to encourage grievances," added Cabot. "The feeling for job security, and not being able to get it, is most commonly what makes the employee seek an outside organization for help."

Schwartz agrees. "Being willing to deal with employees is the key. The employees in most industries seek dependence. If he can get that dependence from his employer, then what does he need from a union to get dependence for him?"

The key, Cabot concluded, "is understanding yourself, understanding your employees and understanding who the adversary is."

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there were more women available, the owner would gladly hire more.

It would seem that such a program would have few if any problems. Not so, says Cheesman. He is highly concerned with reductions in vocational funding that may result in the elimination of small, high-cost programs, or worse, the expansion of the program without necessary staff and equipment. His question is one voiced by many: How do we maintain a high level of quality in an economic crunch? It's a question that haunts many programs where small is beautiful.