

Smoking Policies and the Unions

The story of Pacific Northwest Bell (U.S. West Communications) and the evolution of its smoking policy is a significant one, not only because of the size of the company or the extent of its policy,* but also because of the very comfortable and productive relationship it had with the Communications Workers of America (CWA), its largest union, comprising almost two-thirds of its 15,000 employees.

Thanks to the vision and leadership of Sue Pisha, CWA was urged to take a neutral stance in the smoking policy decision.

An interview with Sue Pisha, Area Director, Northwest Region (Alaska, Idaho, Oregon, Washington), Communications Workers of America, AFL-CIO

Q: What advice did you give to union membership prior to its decisive vote in early 1985, and why?

A: I took over as Area Director in March 1985. The following month, I sent a memo to presidents of all the locals which described the situation as "no win" in terms of settling smokers' rights disputes within the union. And I indicated that we *could* become defendants in litigation should we insist on defending smokers' rights. Contractually, you see, we had no right to smoke.

Q: Did the union then effect any influence on the policy implemented, or was it silenced by its vote of neutrality?

A: It was certainly not silenced. Following the union meeting, I was invited to sit in on Andy Smith's (president, Pacific Northwest Bell) board meeting at which I was able to express some serious union concerns.

First, because it was a company policy, this meant offenders were subject to discipline which the company had the ability to determine and enact. I stressed that the company be extremely fair-handed in terms of discipline and that it not *overreact*.

Q: Could you give an example?

A: The banning of smoking in vehicles was very problematic. For example, what happens if cigarette butts are found in a cab ashtray? How is discipline meted out? We settled that if two people are in a vehicle and one is a nonsmoker, the rights of the nonsmoker prevail.

Q: Having been involved with the development and implementation of Pacific Northwest Bell's policy, why do you think it works?

A: I think success, in terms of the union, comes from the fact that the union was involved from the onset. A joint approach was used, not a unilateral one. Also, I think it is important that the impetus came from the workers. It was a groundswell of support from the workers.

Q: Often a stereotype arises of the union as an enemy of the smoking policy, as one of the biggest hurdles management has to face. How true is this picture?

A: That is a difficult question to answer. Even my own union is hesitant to talk about an entirely smoke-free policy. The union's research department has been involved in the issues. It comes out recommending designated smoking areas, but holds back on going totally smoke-free. Other unions might have no problem. A lot depends on the union. *More* depends on how it is approached.

Q: What advice would you offer employers?

A: You must be up front and communicate with your workers. See if they will accept the idea and participate. Emphasize that it is a no-win situation for everyone. There are people on both sides with valid issues. Smokers must be made to understand that, because of the



Smoking
Policy:
Questions
and
Answers

No. 7 in
a series

2023668676