

The Warning Signs Managers Miss: How to Build a More Transparent Workplace

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It's not uncommon for employers to be caught off guard by union organizing. Managers frequently describe the experience the same way: *"I had no idea."* By the time a representation petition is filed with the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB), the campaign may have been underway for weeks or even months, quietly, strategically, and largely unnoticed. Understanding why management often misses the warning signs and how to build a more transparent workplace culture is critical for maintaining trust among employees.

Even well-intentioned and attentive managers can overlook early warning signs of organizing activity. A lack of complaints is often mistaken for employee satisfaction, but silence can just as easily signal dissatisfaction, especially when workers feel their concerns won't be heard or addressed. Communication gaps also play a major role: frontline supervisors are typically the first to notice shifts in morale or group dynamics, yet they may not report these patterns upward or may fail to recognize their importance. Finally, over time, routine dissatisfaction about scheduling, workload, or management style can become so familiar that it fades into the background, even as it quietly fuels collective frustration.

The most effective way to avoid being caught off guard by organizing activity is to create a workplace culture where employees feel genuinely heard, respected, and valued. This requires intentional, ongoing effort.

First, open and consistent communication is essential, providing employees with regular opportunities to share feedback, raise concerns, and see that their input leads to meaningful action. Second, supervisors should be trained to recognize shifts in morale and to respond effectively, since they are often the first to sense when issues are brewing. Employers can also benefit from conducting periodic check-ins, such as engagement surveys or small-group discussions, to identify recurring themes of employee dissatisfaction. When management understands the root causes of dissatisfaction and addresses them early, employees are less likely to seek outside representation.

It's important to remember that employees have a legally protected right to organize and engage in concerted activity under the National Labor Relations Act. The goal isn't to suppress organizing, but to address the underlying workplace issues that may lead employees to seek union representation in the first place. By staying attentive, transparent, and proactive, employers can work towards fostering a cohesive, engaged workplace and avoiding the all-too-common refrain: *"I had no idea."*