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the bottom line.***

## **Standards, Correction, and Discipline**

Another helpful type of document that is used to promote understanding and consistency within an agricultural business is a code of conduct or list of expectations. It may be incorporated into a handbook or issued separately, but having written rules about behavioral standards informs employees and supports disciplinary action if necessary. Some of the topics that codes address are:

- Endangering self or others
- Absenteeism
- Misrepresentations (e.g., lying to supervisor, falsifying documents)
- Theft
- Misuse of chemicals and equipment
- Fighting, harassment, and abuse of other persons
- Drugs, alcohol use, and substance abuse
- Smoking on the job
- Non-work activities during work hours (e.g., personal business, reading)
- Leaving the workplace without notification or permission
- Sleeping on the job
- Starting time, quitting time, arriving late

With or without a code of conduct, agricultural managers find that all kinds of things happen. Late arrival, absenteeism, intoxication on the job, slow or sloppy work, insubordination, theft, and conflicts among employees raise concerns, tempers, and expenses.

Nearly all mistakes and misconduct eat away at the bottom line, and their costs can be particularly large around more capital-intensive and technologically advanced operations. Where equipment is faster, chemicals more powerful, or loads larger, each worker (on average) affects a greater amount of product. Sloppy picking, pruning, or sorting by a field crew member may mess up a relatively small portion of output, but a mistake in mixing chemicals, controlling temperature and humidity, or adjusting machine clearances can damage thousands of plants or animals.

Skilled personnel management can reduce the incidence of problems but not be counted on to prevent them all. No matter how carefully managers attend to

job design, employee selection, orientation and training, performance management, and pay, things do go wrong from time to time. Preventable or not, worker performance shortcomings and misconduct call for a response. Dealing with problems when they occur is an important part of management, especially at the first-line supervisory level.

*One day last summer a milker arrived at his job 40 minutes late. Other employees in his parlor crew were well into their work. The herdsman noticed this latecomer but said nothing to him, continuing instead to chat with one of the others and pat the animals as they walked by. On a nearby dairy, another milker came about 30 minutes after the scheduled starting time. His supervisor immediately gave him a written warning. At a third operation in the same county that day, the herdsman who supervised a similarly late milker approached him and explained why it was important for the whole crew to be punctual.*



As exemplified by the three dairy supervisors, there are different ways to respond to lateness—or any other incident of employees not meeting reasonable expectations. Whatever managers communicate affects not only the situation at hand but also longer-term relationships with workers, including those not immediately involved. Communication also can generate additional costs or benefits, but a formal policy can help.

### **Policies to Guide Disciplinary Action**

There are still a few growers who rely heavily on a time-honored method for handling problems and the people responsible for them. When they pay good money to employees and do not get good performance value in return, they figure it is time to utter those two famous words: “You’re fired.” Most agricultural employers, however, tend to use alternative methods because they know that workers also can utter two famous words: “I’ll sue.” Or worse, they could be thinking three other chilling words: “I’ll get even.”

Firing an employee who wants to stay is fraught with behavioral and legal challenges. Despite the doctrine of employment “at-will,” several bases from which to contest dismissal can be found in both statutory and case law. Farmers incur sizable costs to defend against charges of former employees, and few of even those who ultimately prevail in litigation feel that they have won anything. Court decisions in wrongful termination cases have led employers in all industries to reexamine their policies on discipline and discharge.

Possible legal action is not the only reason for employers to think more than twice before firing. Growers usually do not want to get rid of people, but rather to live better with them. Discipline policies can contribute to effective personnel