

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



***Discipline informs
and shapes
performance.***

management by both clarifying standards in advance and structuring corrective action once problems occur. Correcting unsatisfactory behavior is more beneficial than punishing it. Discipline means not always having to say, “You’re fired.”

Applied consistently, discipline policies provide a sense of fairness that color the entire work climate and help employees know what to expect from management. Although discipline is often associated with blame and punishment, among its literal meanings are “a branch of knowledge,” “self-control,” and “orderly conduct.” A discipline policy may prescribe the use of penalties, but its main purpose is to inform and encourage sensible, effective behavior on the job. That purpose is best served if policies are clearly and considerately communicated to employees. Disclosure by spoken word during employee orientation or meetings can be confirmed by written word on a bulletin board or in the employee handbook.

Discipline Policy Elements

Discipline policies vary with respect to length, precision, and content, but most have two major components: (1) a set of standards, rules, and prohibitions, that indicate what is expected and what is not allowed, and (2) a set of measures to be taken when the standards are violated.

The list of standards communicates to employees ahead of time what is and is not acceptable within the bounds of lawfulness and reasonableness. An abiding source of discontent among employees is the existence and enforcement of rules that serve no useful purpose. Many a rule made for a forgotten reason irritates workers and burdens supervisors. Consultation with other employers, an attorney, and current employees (especially supervisors) can help managers from making rules that violate local norms, state or federal regulations, and workforce sensibilities. As with decision making on other issues, employees who participate in designing the rules of discipline are more likely to understand how the system works, feel responsible for its success, and help explain it to newcomers.

One general manager makes a habit of conducting yearly reviews of all the personnel dos and don’ts on his ranch, testing each against the question: “What does this rule contribute to my objectives?” The rule lives on if it helps to prevent plant disease, maintain workplace safety, avoid equipment breakdowns, control expenses, prevent disruption of workflow, or serve a similar function. Answers that fail his test include, “We’ve always done it that way,” “It’s our policy,” “The last guy thought it was important,” and “That’s just how I want it.”

The second part of a good discipline system, its action component, is a set of guidelines for what happens when a rule appears to have been broken. If followed, these guidelines protect the employer and supervisors against the complexities associated with shooting from the hip, as they also protect the employee from arbitrary treatment. Prescribed responses typically include simple discussion