



***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

(sometimes referred to as “counseling”), oral warning, written warning, suspension without pay, and discharge.

“Progressiveness,” another typical element of discipline policies, is the application of increasingly severe measures in response to repeated offenses. For some offenses, such as felonious assault, major theft, and deliberate damage to company property, the first incident is reasonable cause for immediate discharge. Most behaviors that violate standards of conduct or performance, however, do not warrant firing on the spot. First instances of tardiness, carelessness, gambling, indiscretion, or the like are usually considered cause for informal discussion or warning. More punitive responses, up to and including dismissal, follow repeated occurrences under a progressive discipline policy. Any offense, if repeated enough, is sufficient to get a person fired. At each stage prior to dismissal, the goal is a behavior change.

The most common first step in discipline systems is counseling (or an equivalent term), during which supervisors informally discuss minor infractions or performance shortcomings with employees. A straightforward, non-antagonistic discussion often reveals that the employee was never informed of a rule that was broken, that temporary circumstances beyond worker control interfered with normal work, that the supervisor misinterpreted what he saw or heard, or that the employee may not yet have been instructed in requisite techniques, so that training or reassignment rather than punitive action is warranted.

It is a good idea to document any disciplinary step taken for subsequent reference. Written records have better memories than people do, and they are invaluable when it comes to defending actions taken. In cases of supervisory counseling, a brief note of the date and the issue discussed is sufficient. A respectable record of more advanced disciplinary actions—warnings, suspensions, and dismissals—and the incidents that prompt them would contain the following items:

1. **Basic circumstances:** Names, dates, times, places, and people associated with the incident
2. **Violation:** Specification of the offense or the rule broken
3. **Expected improvement:** Behavior that the action is intended to elicit or extinguish
4. **Review period:** Time by which the employee will be reassessed to see if correction has been achieved
5. **Employee signature:** Acknowledgment that the discipline has been administered with the employee’s knowledge (not an agreement with the action, simply an awareness of it)

Protect against shooting from the hip.