



Communications in response to performance problems have cumulative and long-lasting effects on relationships.

Dealing One-on-One When Things Go Wrong

Communications in response to performance problems touch agricultural business owners, workers, and public officials for more than the moment. They have cumulative and long-lasting effects on relationships. Within the framework of a disciplinary policy or guide chart, there remain choices of approach in handling a problem incident. Below are definitions, examples, and some pros and cons of immediate responses seen in agricultural firms. Video clips of personnel problem incidents and different responses to them can be viewed at AgHelpWanted.org.

Types of Responses

How many responses can you have to the milker arriving late, the field man asleep in the supply room, the general laborer refusing a work assignment, the irrigator smelling like a brewery, two coworkers loudly arguing with each other, the forklift operator who thinks she is in a chariot race, the foreman extracting personal favors from crew members, and the feeder moving with all the speed of a brain surgeon? At least these nine:

1. **Penalty imposition:** Unilateral administration of a punishment—typically a loss of earnings opportunity, status, or comfort. Supervisor lays it on a worker.

Examples: “You are suspended for 3 workdays.”

“I’m taking you off of the forklift for good.”

(And the ever popular) “You’re fired!”

A *penalty* makes clear to an offender that certain behavior is frowned upon, and it sends to others a strong message about standards. In strictest form, it removes from the workplace a person who caused a problem and could do so again. On the other hand, it may alienate or eliminate an employee whose past and future contributions to the farm outweigh the trouble he or she generates. Replacing fired workers takes time and expense, and decisions to penalize expose employers to legal challenge.

2. **Specific Warning:** Advance notice that a penalty will be administered if an unacceptable behavior continues or recurs. Written form may be construed as a kind of penalty.

Examples: “Here is a formal notice that I won’t put up with your waltzing in late anymore. Next time you don’t show up on time without calling ahead and having a good reason, you will be suspended.”

“If you can’t keep up with the other pruners, I will put you on the rock moving crew.”

“If I see you harassing Jose again, I’m going to have you fired.”

Specific warnings clearly express concern about unacceptable behavior. They afford employees time to improve and prepare themselves for the possibility of penalties. Warnings may antagonize or stigmatize, however, and the worker who has lost face may attempt to regain it at the expense of the supervisor. As commitment to take further action if stipulated conditions prevail, a warning requires supervisory follow-up if credibility is to be maintained.

3. **Vague Threat:** Expression of intent to inflict a penalty of an unspecified nature, usually conditioned on future unacceptable behavior, which also may be imprecisely described.

Examples: “When you butcher the trees like that, I get the feeling you aren’t suited to work on a piece-rate pay system.”

“If you don’t do something about those cartons, I’m going to do something about you.”

“If you keep leaving such a mess outside the parlor, I’ll assume that you don’t like milking the day shift.”

Vague threats can inspire fear, a powerful motivator to most people. The more vague the threat, the less necessary is consistent follow-up. But as a way of conveying either technical or administrative information, this type of response does not deliver much. It sometimes leaves the receiver with no clue about what went wrong, what improvement is desired, or what will happen if changes are not achieved.

4. **Emphasis of Authority:** Statement of a rule or command as legitimate and proper. Implication is that failure to obey constitutes violation of the organization. It often carries an implied warning.

Examples: “I don’t care if you don’t want to clean up the pen today. I am your father, and I assign the work.”

“I am supposed to suspend you for coming back to work in this condition. You know the rules here.”

“As you know, our ranch policy says that tool theft is cause for immediate discharge and possibly even criminal prosecution.”

Emphasis of authority is effective reality therapy to some workers. While clarifying the legitimate expectations of an employing organization, though, it is often faulted for ignoring the human level. Rules that have no reason behind them tend to inspire disrespect for other official standards, and the “I’m the boss” variant of authority is a direct invitation to ego battles and subterfuge.

5. **Avoidance:** Disconnection from an event so as to be unaffected by it. Common forms include pretending ignorance, seeking distraction, and simply not acting on the obvious.



Examples: "Humph."

"Looks like the hogs are getting frisky, doesn't it?"

". (silence)"

Avoidance is the easiest response to execute and is probably the most often used. Some people like to rationalize that it allows mild offenses to go by without turning into a big unproductive deal. Workers who appreciate the break that is given when they misstep or get away with something may develop intense loyalty to their calculating or laid-back supervisors. But when questionable conduct is ignored, the employee displaying it as well as others who know of it are left to assume that it is acceptable. Avoidance foregoes the opportunity to communicate about problem behaviors and results.

6. **Humoring:** coaxing with amusement, flattery, sarcasm, obvious exaggeration or insincerity, or ludicrous talk. If taken literally, it may resemble any of the other types.

Examples: "Gee, I'm awfully sorry. You never sprayed before today, and I forgot to remind you that we usually *measure* the stuff before mixing it in the tank. My mistake, buddy."

"Surely an hombre of your good looks and genius can figure out a way to get along with Maria."

"Your eyes are so bloodshot that it would be a miracle if you could tell the difference between humidity gauge readings and the ball scores. Maybe we should let you run the silo today instead."

Humoring usually comes off as friendly, gentle communication. It can defuse tension about a situation and put events into broader perspective, thus paving the way for more constructive discussion. Sometimes, however, it implies supervisory weakness, frivolity, or lack of seriousness, and it is difficult to follow with formal warning or penalty for repeated violations. Particularly if used without sensitivity and finesse in emotionally charged situations or across cultures, humor may be quite inappropriate and unwelcome, even offensive.

7. **Explanation:** Provision of information that clarifies what the supervisor wants or why. It may consist of facts, reasoning, or know-how. An "irrational" variant can resemble humoring.

Examples: "If you don't show up on time, it makes life tougher on me, your brother, and the rest of the guys here. We are faced with either sitting on our hands until you come or going out there one man short."

"If you use the same towel on different animals, it could easily pass disease from one to the other. That hurts our cows, our production, and our chances of staying in business."

“You have to cut above the second node to optimize vine vigor, as well as next year’s growth. And if you leave too much, we’ll get a lousy crop next year.”

Explanation, rationally provided, usually expresses respect and opens discussion. It can be a simple fix for problems caused by workers not knowing what, why, or how. If lack of information or understanding is not the issue, however, explanation is not a good remedy. Explanations that are unnecessary are often taken as condescending. If necessary but ineffectively provided, they frustrate both the giver and receiver.

8. **Appeal to Interests or Values:** Justification of desired behavior as consistent with worker’s own welfare or beliefs. Offering of a reward—material, social, or spiritual—contingent on future performance constitutes the “quid pro quo” form.

Examples: “Everybody here has had such high respect for you. It will become a distant memory if you come back from lunch in this condition again.”

“The better quality job we do, the more demand there will be for our birds and the more hours of work you will have in the long run.”

“By taking on this extra work, you can show off your ability and commitment. You know, the company is going to need a couple of new lead men in the spring.”

Appeal to values speaks to an employee’s interests and is usually experienced as helpful and supportive. It can clarify for workers how to achieve rewards that are important to them. Supervisors who do not understand well what employees really value, however, are less apt to strike the right nerve with their appeals. Workers with different values or cultural frames of reference may see an appeal to values as more management hokum.

9. **Problem Solving:** Presentation of an undesirable behavior or condition as a problem to be jointly solved. Usually by opening with a question, the supervisor engages the worker in a discussion of the problem and a search for an acceptable solution. It often includes or leads to some explanation in both directions.

Examples: “If we keep up this pace it will take us six days to pack and ship what the boss has budgeted only four for. What can we do about it?”

“That spray rig has to get cleaned now or the work won’t get started early enough tomorrow morning. Why is it that you won’t give me a hand?”

“I know that it’s hot and that you can still pull more than your load with a couple of beers in you. But if I let you drink on break, others would badger me for the same privilege. How can we quench your thirst without inciting a riot around here?”



Problem solving generally shows respect for the employee and initiates conversation likely to yield ideas, commitment, or both. It puts the supervisor and worker on the same side of things. This approach can lead to time-consuming discussion, however. It is a waste of effort where relationships are already too sour or either party is incapable of constructive dialogue.

Various Uses and Effects

These nine responses are related to the measures generally included in discipline policies. Penalty imposition and specific warning are formal responses, and each one has two counterparts on the right side of Figure 6.1 (suspension and dismissal for the former, oral and written warning for the latter). The other seven, however, are all variants of the first measure on the chart, informal discussion, the one that supervisors need to apply much more frequently than all the others combined. There is clearly a range of ways to approach that discussion, and the choice from among these seven types (or from those in a different typology) has consequences.

In practice, the nine types of responses in this typology are often used in combination—explanation with humor, for example, or authority with warning. Among other schemes that incorporate similar concepts, one characterizes leadership by six “styles”—coercive, authoritative, affiliative, democratic, pacesetting, and coaching. Regardless of the classification system used, none of the alternatives in it is the best way to deal with all problems.

What works well in one situation may only exacerbate trouble in another. The dismissal of an apparently intoxicated irrigator can lead to increased respect, a lawsuit, both, or anything in between. An explanation about how more careful pruning affects business volume can develop understanding and loyalty or disdain and resentment. Each type of response has its potential advantages, disadvantages, and place in the manager or supervisor’s repertoire. Where a few responses are used heavily and others not at all, supervisors may be failing to accurately diagnose and handle incidents that occur.

One dimension in which the responses can be readily compared is the amount and nature of communication they initiate. The first four (penalty, warning, threat, authority) are typically one-way interactions. By content and delivery they tend to maintain or increase the distance felt between the supervisor and worker. They often provoke defensiveness, anger, and alienation. Such reactions from employees usually are not sought.

The latter four types (humor, explanation, appeal, problem solving), on the other hand, tend to invite two-way communication and constructive reciprocation. By using these four, the supervisor is more likely to get the intended message across and to receive some useful information—and maybe even greater respect—from the worker.

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