

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.

Communications in response to performance problems touches business owners, workers, and public officials for more than the moment. It has cumulative and long-lasting effects on relationships.