

4 Steps you must use when disciplining staff

In many traditional workplaces, a dusty personnel manual somewhere will outline the basic steps for handling employee problems. Most are straightforward and really don't have different ways of handling different situations. The standard method is to give a verbal warning, then a written warning, then final written warning and finally suspension or termination. The wording in most of these old guides says something along the lines of **“failure to improve may result in further disciplinary methods, up to and including suspension or termination.”**

Quite a few companies still follow something similar to this. It does work in certain narrow circumstances. If the basic problem with the employee is one that the employee is doing deliberately and knows how to correct, the employee may just be trying to take the easiest route to get through the day. If this is common in a workplace, it indicates other problems, but if it's a young person handling a first job, the basic steps may actually be helpful. A new employee with little work experience may realize that they can't slide by as soon as they receive a verbal warning. They may try to correct the situation but then slip again, hoping that the passing of time will fix everything. Perhaps they proceed as far as a written warning and they don't want to lose a paycheck. At that point, they do self-correct simply to earn the money to maintain a lifestyle. That's all great for those narrow situations.

Of course, if a company is being run well and the majority of the employees are motivated to do a job, the standing approach to disciplinary issues probably won't be enough. The employee may have started to lack motivation due to a personal or corporate change. Something about the normal workflow may have been altered and the employee is not deliberately failing but lacks understanding about what is expected. If an organization is really going to have a motivated and dynamic staff, the standard approach to discipline won't work because it doesn't address the actual problem.

Plain punishment does not teach anything. Let's break it down in simple terms. If a young child doesn't know how to tie her shoes, she may put her shoes on but then proceed to other activities with her shoes untied. If a parent shouts at the child to tie her shoes, that is a verbal warning. Of course, if the child isn't sure what is meant or just doesn't know how to follow that advice, nothing will change. The child may feel uncertain but that just decreases morale. Perhaps the child makes a vague attempt to tie her shoes or not. If the parent's next reaction is to have the child sit on a “naughty stool” and write “refused to tie her shoes” on a dry erase board, the child has moved to the written warning. The child may cry (just like an employee might complain to co-workers.)

Let's assume the parent has some idea that the child doesn't fully understand, so the parent ties the shoes quickly and tells the child to keep them tied. The child returns to playtime and the shoes come untied. The problem is back. The parent doubles the time on the naughty stool and writes "let shoes come untied" on the dry erase board. Perhaps the parent tells the child that she will be sent to her room if she fails again. The parent re-ties the shoes. Most children are pretty smart and may try this time to really pay attention even though things happen too fast for real learning to take place. When the shoes come untied again, the child makes a real attempt to re-tie them and succeeded in putting a knot in one shoelace. The parent sees that as rebellion and sends the child to their room, suspending them from play. What has been learned?

Not much. The child still doesn't know how to tie her shoes and is now upset and humiliated. Unfortunately, this happens in the workplace too. Most of the time it isn't because the supervisor intends to humiliate the employee. Just like the parent, the supervisor may just be missing some information. Not enough time has been taken to work out what is really wrong and use a flexible template to come up with steps that will really work. How do we resolve this?

Let's look at four steps any employer or Human Resources department can use to discipline staff in a much more effective way,

1. Describe the Specific Problem to the Employee in a Positive Environment

From supervisors to Human Resources staff, everyone is busy. It can seem very easy to walk by an employee's desk and say "stop talking on your personal phone while you are at work." No matter what the employee's error, is, though, it's so critical to start off positive and take care of the first step in a respectful way. The employee may or may not know that they aren't supposed to do what they are doing, but calling them out in front of others can be a stepping stone toward creating a negative or even a hostile workplace environment.

There is no way to know what personal issues may be at play when you walk by an employee. Perhaps the person is usually a model employee but there was a real family or work emergency that made them feel they were doing the right thing. Perhaps they were doing something they shouldn't have been doing, but if they've been a victim of any kind of workplace bullying, a public "shaming" will usually cause more problems. This typically just results in a gradual move toward more incorrect behavior, but it can even end up becoming a legal problem.

No matter how small the problem is, be respectful and invite the employee to come to a private environment for a coaching session. Even the invitation is best done through an email or another written format so that others aren't aware that the employee might get "in trouble."

Remember that by law, you must notify the employee in writing of the meeting and since it is a disciplinary meeting, you must include notice of the issues to be discussed. You will also typically want to have at least one other person in attendance for secondary support. This is strongly recommended for legal reasons. Hopefully, if you are able to present the issues to the employee in a way that builds trust, you won't have further problems, but you still want to comply with all legal requirements.

When the employee arrives for the meeting, don't make them nervous. Make them feel comfortable and welcome. This will help you build a rapport with the employee and turn them into your ally instead of your enemy. Explain the reason that you asked the employee to come in. Do so in a natural and friendly tone of voice, even if you are explaining that there was a problem. It is better to approach the situation as a shared problem to solve than to make it an accusation against the employee. Avoid sounding overly critical, especially if this is a first-time problem. Clearly explain what the employee did that needs to be changed, and let the employee suggest solutions. For example, you might say:

"I noticed that you were using your personal phone at your desk and we are all supposed to wait for break times to make personal calls. Were you aware of the policy?"

This opens a door for the employee to say that they weren't aware and will correct themselves, or that they were aware but they have an explanation. Even if the explanation isn't a good one, it's a start to a repair. Ask them if they have suggestions for how to avoid repeating the behavior. If it isn't a situation where you can ask in an open-ended way, you might try giving alternatives. For example, you could ask:

"Would it be better for you if we scheduled your first break at 9 AM or would you prefer that it be later in the morning? Is there a time of the morning when you often need to make a call?"

By keeping the meeting positive, you can let the employee feel respected and most will actually want to work with you to resolve issues.

2. Allow the Employee to take Ownership of the Problem even if there is an Escalation

No matter what happens after you take the first step to a disciplinary action, it is very common for the employer to take too much responsibility for the issue. This would be a good thing if it just means that the employer saw improvement as a team effort, but too often it just becomes something more like a power struggle. The employee needs to retain dignity and understand that they are responsible for making a change.

Make sure that the employee acknowledges that there is a problem. This is the first step to giving them ownership. If the employee disagrees with you openly or secretly, you won't get anywhere. You'll need to ask questions to establish how the situation stands. For example, if the employee has been coming in late every day, ask them if they are aware of it. Pay attention to eye contact and body language as well as the actual words. If an employee looks away and has arms crossed, these may be signs that they either perceive the question as an attack or they disagree. You can help by phrasing this in a friendly and open way that encourages cooperation.

If the employee is more relaxed and makes eye contact up to a point, this is a good sign. If they also verbalize that they have been running late because the kids keep missing the bus, you know that they do understand there is a problem.

The next goal is to make sure they take responsibility for it. You don't want to be forceful and put the problem on yourself by saying something like, "I won't tolerate you being late for any reason and I will put a stop to this." It comes off as hostile and it puts the employer in charge of fixing the problem, which isn't even realistic. Employers make this mistake because they want to be authoritative, but it's much better to retain authority and give the employee a chance to fix things.

Ask the employee if they have ideas on how they can arrive at work on time. You might be surprised at how creative an employee can be if given respect and leeway. They will probably offer suggestions that either relate to their behavior or alternatives. Some will just be very open and say that they need to be up earlier and be more attentive to time. Some may make alternative suggestions, such as altering work hours and coming in 9-6 instead of 8-5. If this works in your environment, you may solve the problem simply. If not, you can still continue a dialogue until you work things out.

3. Keep Things Realistic and Neutral

You want to maintain a neutral tone and describe behavior in a neutral way but also stick with the facts. It can help to take notes during an employee discussion. This aids in the documentation, but it also buys you time to think about what you plan to say while you jot things down.

Describe the undesirable behavior in a calm and relatable way no matter what the problem is. If you have an employee who has been accused of poor customer relations and you immediately go in with a description of a “hostile attitude” you can immediately turn the discussion into a fight. Even the worst problems can sometimes be fixed, so you don’t want to turn an employee against you.

Instead of using emotional words to describe a problem, use specific examples that are factual. For example, you may tell the employee that you observed them with a customer and that he ripped a coupon in half and tossed it in the trash instead of returning it to the customer. Then you can explain in a neutral tone that even if the coupon was for another product or another store, the customer might have wanted to use it at another time. Go on to explain that even an expired coupon should be returned to the customer because it helps the customer feel that they were respected. You can point out to the employee that we all like to be treated with respect. This way you are demonstrating the same behavior that you want the employee to emulate.

4.) Make Sure that Communication is Two-Way

We’ve all been in confrontations with someone and had the other person give us a monologue about something they don’t like. It might be a friend, a romantic partner or a boss - but it always feels the same way. No adult likes to be lectured and then dismissed as though they have no worth.

You want to start out disciplinary dialogues differently right from the start. Don’t even bring up the actual problem immediately. Greet the employee and ask how things are going. If you feel comfortable doing so, ask how things are at home or ask about their children, parents or pets. (This really depends on the workplace, so don’t introduce a topic if it’s not a norm at your workplace.)

Watch the employee for cues that show they aren't too tense and that they understand you haven't called them in to chew them out and send them away. Asking questions is usually the fastest way to set this tone. When you have communication moving, then you can bring up the problem. When you bring up the reason you have called them in, continue to keep the communication going both ways. It is easy to start off well but then to switch back to a lecturing mode. Instead, ask questions. Ask if they know why you've asked them to come in. Ask them if they can give you some feedback about how the problem can be fixed. Even if this is just leading up to the resolution steps, this communication method is critical.

What you ultimately want is to avoid a feeling of resentment or have an employee afraid of supervisors. That isn't productive for anyone. What you do want is to encourage the employee, get that acceptance of responsibility, and then move toward a resolution. Even in the worst of cases, this doesn't have to be a horrible experience for you or for the employee. Sometimes it's true that an employee may admit that they aren't happy and want to leave the position, or you may have to proceed toward termination. By keeping a two-way exchange the entire time, you will build your own experience in handling conflict and you'll give the employee more tools for this as well.

Hopefully, the result will be an actual resolution. If you keep the communication moving and the employee can own the problem, commit to a change and walk away feeling respected, you are right on track.