

Progressive Discipline and Mistakes Managers Can Avoid

As a member of management, chances are good that at some point in your career, you will need to respond to an employee's unacceptable conduct on the job. Employee discipline is probably the least favorite element of a supervisor's or a manager's job duties.

Formal discipline policies are necessary so employees have the opportunity to correct performance problems or unacceptable conduct before termination is necessary. Some common reasons for disciplining employees are:

- Absenteeism and tardiness
- Misconduct
- Alcohol/Drug use on the job
- Performance deficiencies

A progressive discipline system gives employees ample notice that failure to change the behavior is accompanied by consequences, which increase each time an employee breaks the rules. A typical progressive discipline policy leads from verbal warnings to written warnings, possible suspension, and finally termination. Where serious violations occur, certain steps may be skipped, but all incidents must be thoroughly examined as to what happened.

One factor that is very important in each and every step is documentation. An objective, written record will help tremendously to justify the business decision to terminate an individual's employment.

The advantages of a progressive discipline policy include:

- It communicates to employees that you are not going to automatically fire them at the first instance of performance issues (unless seriously egregious).
- It keeps employees aware of where they stand in certain situations.
- It ensures that employees whose behavior is unacceptable will be addressed on a definite and consistent basis.
- It provides the business with a system that is fair and defensible against a challenge.

There are disadvantages of a progressive discipline policy as well:

- It can be a time-consuming process to address and monitor improvements in performance. In addition, documentation needs to be maintained and follow-up feedback is required.
- Everyone in disciplinary authority must be properly trained in applying the rules and to understand the policy.
- A formal, written policy should be available and communicated to all employees.

Some discipline mistakes and how to avoid them include:

- **Being inconsistent**—Do not bend the rules for certain employees. Consistent and fair treatment is something an employee values the most. Someone who displays an unacceptable behavior should be addressed immediately in a private setting.
- **Losing temper**—Before saying anything to an employee, take a deep breath, investigate the facts, and think about what to say. Then take the employee into a private area, discuss why there is disappointment, and state expectations for the employee clearly. Document the meeting.
- **Playing Mr. or Ms. Nice Guy**—Avoiding action will diminish the effectiveness and credibility of the supervisor. Employees look to their supervisor to follow through on compliance with organizational policies and ensure that all employees are treated consistently. When discipline becomes necessary, action must be taken. If a supervisor backs down, the supervisory position is no longer taken seriously.

The goal of disciplinary action is to communicate when behaviors are unacceptable and to allow for change. It is ultimately important for an organization to have some sort of discipline policy that is followed step by step in each case. Each circumstance will be different. Maintaining the idea that a discipline program is established to correct and educate an employee rather than punish is a good approach.