

Employee discipline 101: Managing employee behavior

Very few managers relish the role of disciplinarian. Save the handful of leaders who enjoy flaunting their position of power, most would rather spend their valuable time on productivity rather than punishment. As unpleasant as it may be to point out employee wrongdoings and enact company-sanctioned consequences, however, the task comes with the position. Leaders who shun the responsibility risk appearing ineffective or “wimpy.” They also can endanger the safety, morale, and success of their workplace.

Managers who handle employee discipline in a mature, consistent, and organized manner earn the respect of their staff. Employees subject to disciplinary action may even emerge from the experience motivated to improve and more knowledgeable about how to correct their performance or behavior.

While procedures vary by organization, the following offers a general overview of employee discipline:

Be clear from the start

Good news for managers who dislike confrontation: It oftentimes can be avoided. As the old saying goes, an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure. The most desirable way to handle disciplinary matters is to keep events that necessitate employee discipline from ever occurring.

Organizations can convey expectations from day one of onboarding by issuing each new hire a clear, thorough employee handbook for immediate and future reference. Give the worker the opportunity to read the document in full and to ask human resources for any further explanation or clarification. Conclude with the new employee signing a statement that he has reviewed the handbook and understands its contents. This certification avoids potential problems down the line of an employee claiming the company never told him about certain policies.

Each business creates an employee handbook based on its own particular needs and company policies. Many issues, however, commonly appear in any employee handbook. Subjects addressed often include:

- Dress code, hygiene, and facial hair.
- Tardiness.
- Absenteeism.
- Work ethic.
- Insubordination.

- Improper behavior toward colleagues.
- Professionalism.
- Remote work expectations.
- Use of company devices.
- Social media conduct.
- Security procedures, both physical and virtual.
- Confidentiality of company information.
- Alcohol, drug, and marijuana use.
- Theft.
- Bullying and violence.

Spell out what constitutes an infraction. Use examples to illustrate (though state that these cases are to aid with understanding and not meant as an exhaustive list of punishable offenses). Present the typical outcome for initial and repeated violation. Make clear that certain acts are subject to immediate termination.

Outside of the handbook, smart managers think about other proactive measures that can reduce the need for a punitive approach. For instance, some young employees new to the workforce may not fully have a handle on professional appearance and conduct, especially as workplace norms continue to change. They may benefit from being assigned a seasoned colleague to serve as a mentor who can guide them in the right direction.

Or, maybe you have noticed a variety of dress code infringements since the return to the office after the pandemic. Used to wearing sweats at home, staff members may need a reminder about dress code policy. They also may not feel that leadership cares about such things anymore. Plainly stating at the next staff meeting that you will enforce the rules from here on out gives fair warning.

Remain consistent and calm in employee discipline

Sometimes, a manager is tempted to let the behavior of certain people slide. Perhaps she feels weird about confronting a friend or a team member with more years at the company. Maybe she justifies ignoring inappropriate comments someone makes to colleagues because the person in question is the most productive member of the staff.

Regardless of the relationship or rationale, leaders must discipline fairly. Perceived favoritism sets the stage for work environment discord. And, should a former employee pursue legal action down the line, his case gains strength if able to prove inconsistent treatment of employees with similar offenses.

A misbehaving employee can leave a manager hot under the collar. Avoid overreacting or giving the appearance of “picking on” someone by first allowing yourself a chance to cool off and then addressing the situation. Gaining composure is especially important when action involves written discipline that will go into the employee’s personnel file. This information could be looked at by others – including lawyers – down the line and interpreted as unfair if filled with unprofessional ranting. As noted by Thilo Huellmann, CEO at [Levity.ai](#), “You must be able to record events objectively, which can be difficult when you are emotionally involved. Don’t do it when you’re frustrated or angry.”

Follow the discipline process

An effective way for a leader to stay impartial and act legally sound is to abide by the company’s employee discipline policy. Sticking to established procedures avoids the guesswork in handling matters. Employees – and any lawyers or juries later involved in the case – can see evidence of by-the-book conduct.

Exact disciplinary action varies by organization, but many follow a system of progressive discipline. In this arrangement, the severity of punishment increases when a worker fails to correct the behavior in question.

Progressive discipline policy often begins with a verbal warning, especially for first-time offenders for mild offenses such as violating dress code or coming in late. This reprimand draws the employee’s attention to the problematic behavior. Sometimes, the worker may not even realize she is doing something wrong, and this verbal warning provides a heads-up. For others, it serves as notice that management is watching and expects improvement. Discussions on how to rectify inappropriate behavior can be an important part of this stage.

A more serious offense or one that does not improve despite a verbal warning often merits a written warning. This common next step in progressive discipline usually has a more formal format and greater detail. It also often presents an action plan for change and outlines what might next occur should improvement fail to happen.

Companies generally supply managers with a template for written warnings. Standard paperwork ensures consistency and thoroughness. Exact outlines vary by workplace, but common components include:

- The name and position of the employee.
- The name and title of the person writing the warning.
- The date of the write-up.
- The offense.
- The policy being violated, often with a copy of what is stated in the employee handbook.
- A summary of prior action taken regarding this issue, such as verbal warnings.
- A statement letting the employee know where this write-up will be filed and who within the company will be receiving a copy.

- Space for the employee to comment or present his side of the story.
- Space for relevant signatures.

Written warnings frequently include action plans. These statements present the employer's expectations and how to meet them. Giving an offender as clear a route as possible on how to improve makes the disciplinary process productive rather than simply punitive. People feel encouraged to change.

Written warnings also usually come with possible repercussions for failure to alter behavior. Probation, suspension, demotion, and termination are actions that could come next. Spell out these future actions so that an employee does not feel blindsided if they happen.

At each step of progressive discipline, be certain to follow organizational policies as to who should be present at the meeting or notified afterward. This may involve inviting a human resources representative, a union rep, or even a company lawyer to sit in or review paperwork. Although many activities take place remotely at the present time, do not ignore standard procedures. Failure to include the proper witness or representative in a video-conference now can cause big trouble later.

Termination

The ultimate last resort in employee discipline, firing someone comes about in one of two ways. Sometimes, it is the final punishment after corrective actions fail. If a manager has thoughtfully gone through the process of progressive discipline, this outcome should not come as a shock to the employee being terminated.

The other way an employee could lose a job because of his own actions (as opposed to monetary or restructuring decisions out of his control) is by committing a serious offense that demands a severe consequence. Companies usually bypass progressive discipline in favor of immediate termination in cases involving:

- Theft.
- Violence.
- Threats against the company, its workers, or its clients.
- Illegal drugs.
- Destruction of property.
- Major lying (such as fudging numbers).
- Sabotage.
- Sharing proprietary information.

Do not expect termination to be easy for either the giver or the receiver of the news. Even seasoned managers may feel nervous during this interaction. Think through the encounter ahead of time to boost confidence. During the meeting itself, avoid beating around the bush. Calmly and respectfully get to the point.

As tempting as it might seem to let someone go via text or email, don't take the coward's way out. When on-site, most businesses use a private, face-to-face meeting. Check company procedures before deciding how to handle things remotely. Some organizations favor a video conference in order to best replicate a personal one-to-one. Others discourage this method for fear the terminated employee can easily record the meeting to dissect it for any possibility of wrongful discharge. These companies tend to prefer a phone conversation that includes a witness.

Protect against future problems

Whether it's a disgruntled former employee claiming wrongful termination or a worker harassed by a colleague charging that the company did not take sufficient action against the offender, employment-related lawsuits are not uncommon. Thus, the importance of meticulous documentation cannot be stressed enough.

"Protect against legal liability," states Sasha Quail, business development manager of [Claims UK](#). "An unhappy employee can easily argue that he was punished unfairly because of a minor infraction. This can occur months, if not years, after an employee has left the business. Filling out an employee write-up form and saving it in the employee's permanent file would guarantee that you have all the information you need for your protection. When an employee leaves the business, keep these forms and reports for at least three years."

John Stevenson, marketing specialist at [My GRE Exam Preparation](#) adds, "Include all technical details. Never miss details such as dates, people involved, where an incident happened, or who got impacted by the incident. These details are relevant and significant, especially when things progress to a higher court. While these may seem small, it makes up for a deeper understanding and for the expert to be able to distinguish more of the backstory of a certain incident."

Make sure records include not only details about each offense but also about what actions were taken to address the problem. The objective is to paint a clear picture of what happened and how your company handled the situation fairly, promptly, and thoroughly. Include as much "hard" evidence as possible, such as statements from witnesses, productivity reports, recaps of verbal warning, copies of pertinent emails, or even screenshots of inappropriate chat messages or social media postings.

Turning discipline into progress

Employee discipline, of course, does not always produce negative consequences such as terminations or lawsuits. Rather, it can serve as a productive way to guide employees to make improvements that will benefit their career.

"Fair disciplinary reports can help your employees to grow," says Charles McMillan, founder of [Stand With Main Street](#). "Just because they have done something wrong doesn't mean they cannot improve in the future. Let them know what actions would help them to bounce back from mistakes."

The company's written reprimand template may include a space for the manager to lay out goals for improvement of behavioral issues or performance issues. Objectives should be clear, specific, and measurable (if possible) to aid in understanding and realization. An employee told she must exhibit greater professionalism, for instance, may have no clue what that really means. However, she's likely to grasp what management desires if told to get to work on time every day, call if she's going to be late, stop chewing gum around clients, and refrain from wearing flip flops to the office.

Some organizations favor using a separate, formal Performance Improvement Plan (PIP) — especially for ongoing unacceptable behavior or poor performance. This tool offers a pathway to success by providing a blueprint for what needs to happen. It details a list of goals to complete by a certain period of time, typically 30, 60, or 90 days.

Common elements of a Performance Improvement Plan include:

- A statement about why the PIP is needed.
- Identification of the employee behavior or employee performance problem, with concrete examples.
- A list of actions the employee needs to make to correct the issue.
- An outline of what the company can do to assist in facilitating changes, such as providing regular feedback, assigning a mentor, or offering additional training.
- Creation of a timeline for when goals need to be met.
- Explanation of consequences or disciplinary measures for failing to meet objectives.

Whether a manager uses a PIP or some other method, always follow up. PIPs, write-ups, and other corrective actions receive a reputation as bureaucratic nonsense if filed away without further thought. Show staff members you take these measures seriously by revisiting the stated terms together. If not met, move to the next disciplinary stage. And if improvement has occurred, congratulate the employee on his achievement!