

Disciplining

Disciplining is one of the least satisfying aspects of personnel management. You should therefore strive for self-discipline among your employees. If there has been careful recruitment of employees followed by a sound training program, and proper attention to human needs, discipline problems should be minimal. Nevertheless, disciplining an employee is needed on occasion.

The Goal of Discipline

Effective discipline is designed to prevent problems and encourage productive performance and behaviour, not to punish employees for making mistakes. Stress the use of discipline to produce positive changes.

In a typical week, you may encounter several situations requiring some kind of discipline. You will ensure the effectiveness of the disciplinary action you take by combining it with an awareness of the goals you are trying to achieve.

An ounce of encouragement is worth a ton of censure.

Situation	Discipline	Goal
A worker forgets to treat a sick cow; the cow dies.	Verbal and written warning	To convey the importance of the need for intensive care of sick cows.
A young picker starts a fruit-throwing fight after already receiving one warning.	Dismissal	To encourage responsible behaviour by the pickers.
A bookkeeper releases confidential information to a competitor.	Written warning	To stress the need for company loyalty.

Progressive Discipline

Discipline means not always having to say "You're fired".

Howard Rosenberg

Howard Rosenberg who is an extension specialist from the University of California discusses the following story.

Ben Chavez was enraged. Not since his recent promotion from mechanic to shop foreman had he faced a situation quite like this, and he was not about to let it endanger his hard-earned reputation.

"Alright, Sleeping Beauty," shouted Chavez at a startled George Walston, "get up and get out—for good. I should have figured you were grabbing a regular siesta back here just by looking at how little work you've been getting done out front. You'll have plenty of time to sleep now."

Ben's reaction to the sight of his man asleep on the job is understandable. But was it reasonable or defensible? More important, was it in the best interest of the ranch? To answer these questions we first have to ask other questions. What is Walston's record with the company? Is this the first time that he has stepped out of line? Has anybody else on the ranch ever been caught napping, and what happened to him? Is there an explicit disciplinary policy that specifies rules and penalties for violation?

While Chavez intended to rid himself of a problem employee, his troubles may have been only beginning. The summary dismissal of Walston may prompt:

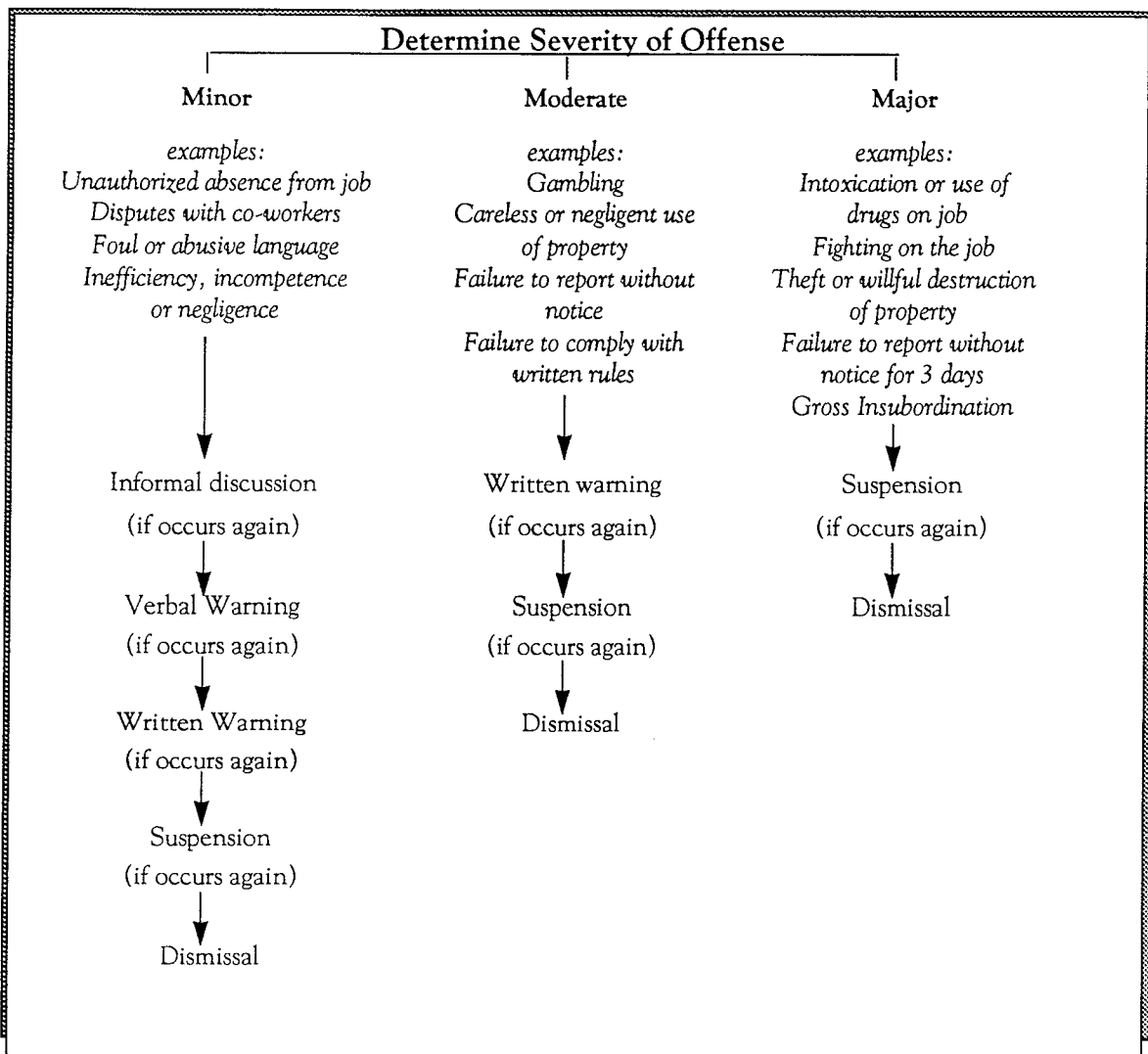
- 1) the general manager to doubt Chavez's judgement
- 2) other shop employees to retaliate in subtle ways on Walston's behalf
- 3) Walston himself to file a legal complaint against the ranch.

Chavez's position would be far less tenuous, however, if his decision in this incident were based on a written disciplinary procedure that had been clearly communicated and consistently applied in the past.

The progressive discipline approach defines exactly what actions occur as a result of unacceptable performance or behaviour. These actions escalate, depending on the number and severity of the offenses.

By imposing a systematic approach to discipline, you eliminate arbitrary decisions made out of frustration and ensure that each employee receives fair treatment. For the progressive discipline approach to work smoothly, each employee should receive written notice of the discipline levels at the time of employment.

Sample Procedure for Progressive Discipline



Communication with the Employee

When a discipline infraction occurs, you want to take action as quickly as possible.

Using a variation on the story about Chavez dismissing Walston for sleeping, let's suppose you've just found Joe Martin asleep on a bale of hay when he should have been grooming the horses. This is the second time you've caught him sleeping on the job and he's already received a written warning.

Here's how you might handle it.

Supervisor's Role	Specific Action
1. Match the behaviour to the discipline required. Review Joe's record and determine what outcome you expect.	Decide that you will remind Joe of the written warning and then suspend him for three days.
2. Ask Joe to meet with you <i>privately</i> . Adopt a non-judgmental attitude and begin with a question. Allow Joe to explain his position.	"I'm worried about your sleeping in the barn. Is your show jumping taking up too much of your spare time?"
3. Inform Joe of the corrective action required: suspension.	"Because you've already had one warning, I have to suspend you for three days. You know we just can't have the horses neglected."
4. As soon as possible, shift the discussion from the reprimand to positive suggestions for change.	"Can we think of a way of lightening your load? How about reducing your work hours and just have you do grooming? Sue could take over some of your other duties. Then you'll have more time for your show jumping. Of course with fewer hours, you'll receive less pay."
5. Provide Joe with a written record of the incident. Include a description of the behaviour change expected and the consequences of another violation.	Ask Joe to sign the record to acknowledge the discussion and his awareness of future consequences.

Response to Performance Problems

There are a number of different approaches to disciplining, some of which are listed below. Remember that what works well in one situation may not work in another. As well, a combination of these approaches may work better than using only one.

Of the responses presented in the following chart, the first four (penalty, warning, threat, authority) are typically one-way communications - they don't encourage discussion or feedback. These responses tend to maintain or increase the distance felt between the supervisor and worker. They often provoke defensiveness, anger and alienation.

The last four types of responses, humour (if used when appropriate), explanation, appeal, and problem solving, tend to invite two-way communication and constructive results. By using them, the supervisor is more likely to get the message across and to gain useful information back.

Different Ways to Respond to Performance Problems			
Response	Example	Advantages	Disadvantages
Penalty Imposition	"You are suspended for 3 working days."	Makes clear to offender certain behaviour is unacceptable; sends strong message to other workers.	May alienate or terminate employees whose contributions to farm outweigh the trouble they caused.
Specific Warning	"If you can't keep up with the other pruners, I'll put you back on the rock moving crew."	Expresses strong concern about unacceptable behaviour while giving employee chance to improve. Supervisory follow-up is required if credibility is to be maintained.	Warnings may antagonize and the worker may try to "gain face" at the expense of the supervisor.
Vague Threat	"If you keep butchering these trees and leaving such a mess, I'll assume you don't want piece-rate."	Can inspire fear, a powerful motivator. The more vague the treat, the less follow-up needed.	Conveys no technical information so worker has no direct information about how to improve performance.
Emphasis on Authority	"I am supposed to suspend you for coming back to work in this condition. You know the rules."	Helpful reality therapy for some workers.	The "I'm the boss" attitude is a direct invitation to ego battles and subterfuge.

Different Ways to Respond to Performance Problems (cont'd)

Response	Example	Advantages	Disadvantages
Avoidance	"Humpf"; "Gee what time is it anyway?"	Easy to do and workers given a break may develop a loyalty to their supervisor.	Ignoring misconduct may send a message to the offender and other workers that such conduct is acceptable. Avoidance foregoes communication about problem behaviours and results.
Humouring	"Surely someone with your good looks and obvious genius can figure out how to get along with people."	Comes off as friendly and can diffuse tension. Can pave way for constructive discussion.	Can imply supervisory weakness or lack of seriousness. If used without sensitivity or finesse, humour can be destructive.
Explanation	"You have to leave the hulls on the strawberries. They don't keep as well if the hulls get pulled off."	Expresses respect and opens discussion. Can be a simple fix for problems which arise from lack of know-how.	Explanations that are not needed can be taken as condescending. If needed but are ineffective, can frustrate both worker and supervisor.
Appeal to Values	"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."	Is usually experienced by worker as being helpful and supportive. Can clarify for workers how to achieve important rewards.	Supervisors need to understand what employees really value, otherwise appeal will have no effect.
Problem Solving	"The spray rig has to be cleaned now or the work won't get started early enough tomorrow morning. Why won't you give me a hand?"	Shows respect and initiates conversation likely to produce ideas and commitment. Puts supervisors and worker on same side of things	Can consume much time. Won't work if relationship is so deteriorated that constructive dialogue isn't possible.

Information in this chart was drawn from a paper by Howard Rosenberg, presented at the workshop, "Agricultural Personnel Management for Extension Educators", held in Napa, California, February, 1992.