

When and How to Discipline Employees

This HR expert offers advice on how to handle employee misconduct.

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Gone are the days of arbitrary--a.k.a. inappropriate--discipline. Today's employers must implement consistent and fair disciplinary policies, especially when it comes to dealing with terminations, or face an increase in unemployment costs and/or discrimination claims. Typically, employers most often use disciplinary guidelines as a basis for handling employee misconduct, such as insubordination. Initial performance deficiencies, on the other hand, are usually best addressed with coaching.

Understanding the difference between performance deficiencies and misconduct can help you understand which techniques to use to handle each type of situation and will help you achieve better results. To avoid confusing the two, remember to address performance deficiencies, such as poor quality work or low production output, through performance management, as these issues reflect your [business's core competencies](#), and address improper behavior with discipline, because it endangers your business's core *values*.

Performance management, counseling statements and coaching are the preferred methods for addressing your initial problems with an employee's performance deficiencies. If the deficiencies continue, however, you may need to resort to disciplinary measures as well.

The first step in addressing employee disciplinary problems is to review your company's disciplinary policy. If you don't have one, this might be a good time to develop one. Your company's prior practices in handling problems and complaints are very helpful in figuring out what may be appropriate for current or future situations. Also, with a formal policy in place, your company can re-emphasize its values and philosophies regarding employee behavior and conduct.

Putting emotions and personality aside, enforcing a disciplinary policy fairly and equally minimizes problems and increases office morale. An HR professional can act as an objective third party to help defuse emotional situations, as well as advise on corrective measures that are aligned with your business's philosophy, policy and the law.

As incidents arise, there will be questions to answer and decisions to make. The first thing you need to consider is whether the incident is a minor issue, a first offense, or a repeat. A first-time, minor offense can be handled with a verbal warning or a written counseling statement. Beyond this, an HR professional or employment attorney, who can both offer a legal perspective on disciplinary issues, should be consulted to determine the best strategy for settling the situation, which could mean a written counseling statement, suspension or possibly termination.

If and when the time comes for a face-to-face sit-down with the employee, you should be supportive and non-confrontational, with specific objectives and deadlines outlined for correcting the situation. It might be a good idea to have a third, non-involved person present as a potential witness in case the situation leads to legal action. Set dates and times for follow-up meetings, and continue meeting until the issue's been resolved. Be sure to supply the person or persons handling HR for your company with all related documentation.

The keys to successful employee discipline are:

- notifying employees of company policies
- treating every employee in the same manner
- good documentation
- putting the employee on notice of the inappropriate conduct through a verbal or written counseling statement
- addressing infractions properly and timely, rather than letting them grow into bigger issues

Remember, your goal is a productive, happy staff that will help you succeed.

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