Developing Effective Discipline Programs



An effective, comprehensive, and successful discipline program should contain the following elements:

- **Code of conduct.** Employees should know the difference between expected and unacceptable behavior. Ideally, this should be in writing in a list of basic, general work rules or an employee handbook or other material provided to the employee.
- **Philosophy.** Employees should know what you expect to achieve through disciplinary action.
- **Knowledge of disciplinary punishments.** Employees should know the penalty you will impose for common offenses of the code of conduct.
- **Standardized disciplinary procedures.** Employees should know that the steps and the sequence in which they occur in the disciplinary process will be the same for everyone. If you put the steps in writing ahead of time, make sure that you follow the steps that you outline for employees. Don't include steps in the process that you may not take every time, like "the company will give an oral warning." There may be times when an oral warning is not appropriate, but if you include it, employees can reasonably expect you to take that step regardless of the circumstance.
- **Quick response.** Employees should expect a quick response to violations of the code of conduct.
- **Appeal procedure.** Employees should have the opportunity to voice their side of the story. While a full-blown appeal procedure may not be practical, you should at least give them a fair hearing before disciplinary measures are taken.
- **Reservation of rights.** If you have a written policy, you should include a statement that the policy is to be used as guidance and that you reserve the right to modify the policy in any way should the circumstances require that you do so. While this statement would not allow you to ignore your policy, it would notify the employee that there may be circumstances that will be treated differently. It can also be useful if an employee disputes the appropriateness of a particular disciplinary action based on his or her interpretation of the wording of the document.
- **Ensuring fair discipline.** In deciding which approach you'd like to take, keep in mind that a system that is viewed as fair by the employees who must live under it is more likely to receive their support and cooperation. A fair policy also means that discipline must be applied consistently to all employees in an unbiased way.

A fair policy does not mean a lax policy – discipline can be serious and even harsh, but fair. Fair discipline is also easier to defend and justify in court, should the need arise.

A basic foundation of fairness in discipline is:

- giving an employee notice that there is a problem
- providing an opportunity for the employee to change behavior, possibly through coaching

In this philosophy, the purposes of discipline are to:

- put a stop to the unacceptable behavior
- retain the employee as a productive member of the business

Systems designed to punish rather than educate are much more likely to be viewed by employees as arbitrary and unfair than those designed to educate and correct. That’s in part because disciplinary systems designed to educate and correct are less likely to use the ultimate form of discipline – termination – until after an employee has been disciplined less severely in a series of progressive steps.