

Employee Disciplinary Process

The disciplinary process can be one of the most challenging for managers to navigate. However, when it is done correctly, it can be a positive learning experience for all involved. When employers have clear job description, policies and protocols in place, we manage expectations from the start, reduce the need for discipline and keep things in a coaching phase instead. These documents should be well constructed, provided for the team, remain easily accessible, be USED as reference material in staff interactions, and routinely reviewed/ revised with updates given regularly to the staff. This includes staff insight into the disciplinary process itself. Team members should understand the escalation of action the practice will take in various situations, as well as grounds for immediate termination for serious infractions.

Take the time to outline a specific hierarchy of disciplinary steps for your practice, giving yourself enough room to work the system. The idea is that you want to address violations as soon as they arise and have the ability to take the smallest yet most effective step to improve the situation. Practices that wait until a situation has become chronic or frustrating for the whole team are forced to have one long meeting that details months of behavior that included no real warning or corrective action. Then they must start the action and documentation process with an insufficient first step, perhaps a verbal warning, that does not reflect the practice's need to modify the behavior or situation. The better approach is to take things up when they occur and revisit the improvement or lack thereof frequently.

As for specific disciplinary steps, we are all familiar with the basics, but this is an area that is at the discretion of every owner and can be modified to best fit your team. Consider the following.

1. Verbal coaching
2. Verbal warning
3. Written warning
4. Written report of incident
5. HR assessment if the employee needs to enter formal retraining, noting any lack of initial training
6. Follow up meeting on designated date to review coaching plans and discuss next steps
7. Retraining, if necessary, with clear expectations and follow-up dates
8. Probation – documented with clear dates and follow up plans
9. Suspension – documented with clear dates and follow up plans
10. Termination

All steps should be clearly documented and added to the personnel file. It is recommended that steps after an initial conversation be signed by both the supervisor and the employee.

It is typical for employees in a designated phase of the disciplinary process to not be eligible for any bonus structure that might be in place. This must be clearly outlined in the employee handbook.

It is necessary to offer the support and training needed to an employee who is underperforming. Routine check-ins should occur with anyone on a coaching or improvement plan. A check-in should be documented and added to the personnel file. A best practice throughout the disciplinary process is to have a definitive end to the process regardless of the outcome. This timeline should be clear to both the employee and management.

While it can sometimes be a challenge, it is important for the supervisor/manager to remain unbiased throughout the execution of a training, improvement or disciplinary plan. This allows the process to work. Using proper communication, direction, coaching and expectation management will lead you to clear decisions that employees can function well in their designated roles or must be reassigned or released.