



Enterprising Rural Families™

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TIPS OF THE MONTH:

Writing a family/business history may be taken from:

- Letters, cards, notes and news clippings from family collections.
- Listening to, and recording, memories from family members
- Contacting members of the older generations or long-time friends of the family.
- Using a family tree web site to trace generations.
- Examine family albums and photographs.
- Examine library newspapers, when available, for any mention of family names.

Generation gaps in the workplace today are wider than ever and of greater strategic importance. Each generation brings its own set of values, beliefs, life experiences and attitudes to the workplace. These differences are encouraging us to re-examine the way we work with each other.

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Policies to Guide Disciplinary Action

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One day last summer a construction worker arrived at the job site 40 minutes late. Other workers on the crew were already at work. The foreman noticed the late worker but said nothing, continuing instead to talk with one of the other workers. On a nearby construction site, another worker came about 30 minutes after the scheduled start time. His supervisor immediately gave him a written warning. At a third job site, the foreman who supervised a similarly late worker approached him and explained why it was important for the whole crew to be on time.

As illustrated by the three foremen, there are different ways to respond to lateness—or any other incident of employees not meeting reasonable expectations. Whatever managers communicate affects not only the situation at hand but also longer-term relationships with workers, including those not immediately involved.

Discipline informs and shapes performance

There are still a few business owners who rely on a time-honored method for handling personnel problems. When they pay good money to employees and do not get good performance in return, they figure it is time to utter those two famous words: “You’re fired.” Most business employers, however, tend to use alternative methods because they know that workers also can utter two famous words: “I’ll sue.”

Firing an employee who wants to stay can be filled with legal challenges. Despite the doctrine of employment “at-will,” several bases from which to contest dismissal can be found in both statutory and case law. Owners incur sizable costs to defend against charges of former employees, and few of even those who ultimately prevail in litigation feel that they have won anything.

Possible legal action is not the only reason for employers to think more than twice before firing. Business owners usually do not want to get rid of people, but rather to more effectively work with them. Discipline policies can contribute to effective personnel management by both clarifying standards in advance and structuring corrective action once problems occur. Correcting unsatisfactory behavior is more beneficial than punishing it. Discipline means not always having to say, “You’re fired.”

Applied consistently, discipline policies provide a sense of fairness that impacts the entire work climate and helps employees know what to expect from management. A discipline policy may prescribe the use of

You're Hired....



penalties, but its main purpose is to inform and encourage sensible, effective behavior on the job. That purpose is best served if policies are clearly and consistently communicated to employees. Guidelines conveyed during employee orientation or meetings can be confirmed by written word on a bulletin board or in the employee handbook.

Discipline policy elements

Discipline policies vary with respect to length, precision, and content, but most have two major components: 1) a set of standards, rules, and prohibitions that indicate what is expected and what is not allowed and 2) a set of measures to be taken when the standards are violated.

An important part of a good discipline system is a set of guidelines for what happens when a rule appears to have been broken. If followed, these guidelines protect the employer and supervisors against the complexities associated with shooting from the hip, as they also protect the employee from arbitrary treatment. Prescribed responses typically include simple discussion (sometimes referred to as “counseling”), oral warning, written warning, suspension without pay, and discharge.

“Progressiveness,” another typical element of discipline policies, is the application of increasingly severe measures in response to repeated offenses. For some offenses, such as felonious assault, major theft, and deliberate damage to company property, the first incident is reasonable cause for immediate discharge. Most behavior that violate standards of conduct or performance, however, do not warrant firing on the spot. First instances of tardiness, carelessness, gambling, indiscretion, or the like are usually considered cause for informal discussion or warning. More punitive responses up to and including dismissal,

Figure 1. Guide for disciplinary action.

Examples of unacceptable performance		Disciplinary actions
Minor Late arrival to job site Unapproved absence Uncivil conduct Disputes with coworkers Wasting materials Failure to submit time sheets or records Poor quality work Foul or abusive language	⇒	1. Informal discussion (next occurrence) 2. Verbal warning (next occurrence)
Moderate Gambling on work site Releasing confidential information Absence without notice, 1 day Sleeping on the job Careless use of tools or equipment Disregard to safety procedures/work rules Failure to report accidents	⇒	3. Written warning (next occurrence)
Major Intoxication or drug use on job Fighting on job Theft or destruction of company property Gross insubordination Falsifying job application, time cards or other records Abuse of supervisory authority Absence without notice, 3 days Inability to complete training required for job	⇒	4. Suspension (next occurrence) 5. Dismissal

follow repeated occurrences under a progressive discipline policy. Any offense, if repeated enough is sufficient to get a person fired. At each stage prior to dismissal, the goal is behavior change. Figure 1. is a diagram that suggests the steps of a system and the types of offense that would trigger various disciplinary actions on first occurrence.

Remember, a policy statement in the employee handbook or on a bulletin board is not all that is needed to establish discipline and guide responses to problems. No matter how long and detailed the policy may be, incidents that it does not cover explicitly are bound to arise. Labeling offenses as “*examples* of unacceptable performance,” implies that other actions also may trigger sanctions. A chart such as Figure 1 is best used only as a guide to thinking about discipline and discussing it with foremen, not as a document to be distributed to all employees.

Keep written records

It is a good idea to document any disciplinary steps taken for subsequent reference. Written records have better memories than people do, and they are invaluable when it comes to defending actions taken. In cases of performance “counseling,” a brief note of the date and the issue discussed is sufficient. A record of more advanced disciplinary actions - warnings, suspensions, and dismissals - and the incidents that prompt them would contain the following:

Basic circumstances: Names, dates, times, places, and people associated with the incident.

Violation: Specification of the offense or the rule broken.

Expected improvement: Behavior that the action is intended to elicit or extinguish.

Review period: Time by which the employee will be reassessed to see if correction has been achieved.

Employee signature: Acknowledgment that the discipline has been administered with the employee’s knowledge (not an agreement with actions, simply an awareness of it).

Reference:

Rosenberg, H.R., Carkner, R., Hewlett, J.P., Owen, L., Teegerstrom, T., Tranel, J.E., & Weigel, R.R., (2002). *AgHelp-Wanted: Guidelines for managing agricultural labor*. Greeley CO: Western Farm Management Extension Committee.



Have a Definite Discipline Policy Plan

Be sure it includes:

- a clear set of standards
- what is expected and what is not allowed
- a set of steps to be taken when standards are violated

Be sure all employees understand each step and details have been covered personally.
Keep records.

