



Small Biz Strategies

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You thought Zack was the perfect hire. His employment application was neatly filled out, the face-to-face interview went smooth, the reference checks came through with flying colors, and his personal image was impeccable. It was just too good to be true...and you were right! After several months Zack's performance began to falter. Tardiness increased, a surly attitude towards co-workers and customers became noticeable, and his behavior hedged on unacceptable. What can one do in this situation? Ever been in this spot? Many bosses have!

Most of the time, employees come to work with the mindset of doing a good job. They know what is expected of them and they work hard to exceed the boss's expectations. However, when an employ-

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ee's behavior violates a company policy or rule set by the company, discipline or corrective action may be in order.

Progressive discipline is a process for dealing with such behavior. The primary purpose for progressive discipline is to assist the employee in understanding that a performance problem or opportunity for improvement exists. The process of progressive discipline should not be used as a punishment to be inflicted on an employee, but as a tool to assist the employee in overcoming whatever performance problem they might have. Discipline is a form of instruction or training that corrects, molds, or perfects

Progressive Discipline: Taking the right steps

character.

Progressive Discipline is a system of discipline where the penalties increase upon repeat occurrences of infractions. There are normally four stages in the process: 1) Verbal Warning (counseling), 2) Written Warning, 3) Demotion/Suspension, and 4) Termination. The stage chosen for a particular infraction will depend on a variety of factors that include the severity of the infraction, the previous behavior and work history of the employee and how the choice will impact the overall performance of the workplace. Infractions and consequences should be part of a written Code of Conduct that is displayed in a company's new employee orientation handbook.

Prior to identifying what particular stage a manager will begin the progressive discipline process at with an employee, he or she should ask themselves the following questions:

- Did the employee intentionally break the rules or generate the problem?
- How severe were the consequences of the violation? To others? To the company's reputation?
- What is the employee's past disciplinary record? Is this an out-of-character behavior?
- Could a temporary personal crisis be contributing to this dilemma?
- Have you overlooked the same behavior in the past?
- What is the employee's attitude towards the possible consequences?

Such questions help formulate a plan for carrying out the disciplinary process which will give the manager both the tools and confidence they need to make a fair, consistent and legally defensible disciplinary decision.

So how does one use progressive discipline to get the intended results? To come to a decision as to what type of discipline is appropriate in a particular situation? You must:

First: Investigate the facts.

Some infractions are outright obvious, while others are questionable. Take time to collect all pertinent information before deciding what to do. Don't be reactive or speculative. Ask yourself, *How is the employee's problem or behavior affecting the businesses work environment, business base and reputation?* The answers will provide objective insights and views of the situation.

Second: Choose a disciplinary action that fits the seriousness and gravity of the problem.

Consider the behavior or act, is it a

first time problem or continual recurring behavior. What is the employee's history of discipline? Was the act a minor infraction of company policy or a major illegal behavior that requires heavy consequences?

Prior to meeting with the employee, prepare yourself mentally and emotionally. Practice what you are going to say and bring any necessary support documentation to justify your findings (employee handbook, performance evaluations, company policies, earlier disciplinary reports etc.).

Third: Meet with employee in a neutral location and set a professional tone.

Identify a meeting place that will be non-threatening to the employee. Be honest, respectful and straight-forward in the sharing of your findings. Categorize problem and how it impacts the company. Be a careful listener. Zero in on the root of the problem and what has caused it. Once root is noted, a conversation on solutions should take place. The goal is to help the employee come up with ways to solve the problem and get back on track. Work together on

developing a personal development plan with measurements that the employee with take ownership of. Be specific in the details.

Finally: Create Documentation

Progressive discipline documents serve several purposes: they provide proof that the employee was aware that corrections in their performance or behavior was needed, that they were given a fair opportunity to improve or change their performance or behavior and they create a written record for the employees personal folder. All documents should be signed by employees prior to filing them.

Whenever possible, end progressive discipline on a positive note. Offer support and encouragement and express confidence in the employee's ability to improve. Conclude with a handshake or with other gestures of trust. You should make a point to communicate with the employee again before the day ends, even if just to talk about something else. This lets him or her know that you do not hold a grudge.



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