

BY JERRY GAETA / GUEST COLUMNIST

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Discipline isn't easy

Discipline is a source of distress for many companies and is often due to unwritten or unclear policies. If employees know what is expected of them at the time of hiring, many discipline problems could be avoided. A detailed company manual should list what is expected of the employee and, in turn, what he or she can expect of the employer. It establishes rules and guidelines and the consequences if they are not followed. When you remove possible gray areas and provide consistency, it will make your managers' and foremen's jobs easier.

Establish a company chain of command to direct attention to the proper person who is responsible. The manual should be written so that your employees understand it.

Handling discipline problems

You must document improper discipline because lack of documentation is a major cause of employee grievances. Document verbal warnings — this will protect

you and show you take these matters seriously.

Perhaps you're concerned about losing employees if you discipline them. I call this being held hostage. In this tight labor market, that's not a valid argument. Think about the message you're sending the other employees. Also, think what affect this has on the people following the rules — you are diminishing their morale. You're better off without the offender.

When confronted with a discipline problem, always ask yourself, "How would I like to be treated if I was being disciplined?" This philosophy will make the situation easier to deal with. Think before you act and, if unsure of what to do, discuss the situation with someone else, but do not allow too much time to elapse in your decision-making process.

If you have reoccurring problems such as absenteeism and tardiness, try a reward system. This can be as simple as a weekly pay incentive for perfect attendance. Positive reinforcement may achieve the required results quicker and easier than negative reactions.

Make sure the right person handles the discipline and be careful not to overstep your foreman, for instance, if a laborer needs to be disciplined. You don't want to reduce the foreman's authority in the eyes of those in his charge.

You may want to provide training in human relations skills for your managers; it may solve future problems.

There is no magic formula in dealing with these problems; a basic system needs to be in place, as well as good ol' common sense. (See sample performance appraisal sheet on p. 23).

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Jerry's corrective steps

1. Verbal counseling — refer to rule or regulation, note date of incident, summarize the incident, get response from employee.
2. Written warning — refer to rule or regulation with date, summarize and get employee response, both parties sign. Check if employee accepts this scenario.
3. Second warning (written) or work suspension notice — detail incident (rule, date, summary), list suspension dates, both parties sign, check if employee accepts.
4. Employee termination — record summarizes incidents and rules/regulations, employee response, both parties sign, check if employee accepts.