Discipline in Safety: What Works, What Doesn’t, and How to Get it Right

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We sometimes hear managers say that they have rules and procedures for safe operations, and the way to reduce injuries is simply to enforce those rules. We also hear some people say that discipline should never be used. This is often expressed in conjunction with organizations using behavior-based safety (BBS). These people suggest that using discipline is inconsistent with building a collaborative culture in which employees are engaged. Neither of these views is correct. The former reflects an attribution bias that gets in the way of achieving safety excellence, and the latter fails to give employees credit for understanding that there are some situations where discipline is the right thing to do, provided it’s done appropriately and respectfully.

Why discipline is so hard

Disciplinary actions are punishment. The first dictionary definition of “discipline” is “punishment.” When we talk about administering discipline in the workplace we really are talking about punishment. But when we talk to people about punishment for safety violations we tend to get a very different reaction than when we talk about discipline for safety violations. Talking about “discipline” the reaction is generally that this is an accepted practice, and while there are different views about how to use it and how effective it is, the topic is one that people are comfortable with. But if we start the same conversation using the word punishment the reaction we tend to get is that people want to reject the notion that it’s appropriate.

The technical definition of punishment in behavioral science is a consequence focused on reducing unwanted behavior. This is precisely what our workplace discipline programs are intended to be. But punishment seems to be a loaded word. We think of discipline as a legitimate thing to do in the workplace, but are much less comfortable if the same thing is described as punishment. To the person on the receiving end the action is received as punishment, and if we remember that it helps us use discipline more appropriately and effectively. Recognizing how it can feel to the recipient will help us understand the differences between effective and ineffective use of this approach.

Let’s ask ourselves, “What are we trying to accomplish with workplace discipline (punishment) for safety?” In general, what we want is to get consistent conformance to rules and procedures. We have someone not exhibiting the behavior we want, and we want to change that. The rules and procedures are presumably established because they define the safe way of doing work, so following the rules and procedures will reduce exposure to injury. No one would argue with that goal. But often the use of punishment stirs up very negative reactions.

There are many reasons that use of discipline (punishment) doesn’t have desired effect: The violation may be unintentional and the employee being punished then can feel blindsided, especially if the behavior being punished has been condoned in the past. Use of discipline can embarrass the employee, and leave him feeling like he was singled out. Because discipline is often used poorly, in many workplaces where discipline is used for safety we see very negative side effects. People can be resentful or angry when they are subjected to disciplinary actions. This can result in low morale, which can spread when disciplined employee talk to peers about being treated unfairly (as they perceive it.) In the worst case it can lead to people hiding information that you’d really like to know about workplace exposures, and even to malicious compliance—where people look for ways to use the rules to obstruct company goals.

But it doesn’t have to be that way. There is an appropriate role for punishment if we use it in the right way. Before we go there, let’s understand a bit more about the errors people make with discipline and punishment.
What doesn’t work: Five common pitfalls

1. Inconsistency

The most common problem we see in trying to use discipline is inconsistency. Remember discipline is punishment—a consequence focused on eliminating a behavior. We know that for a consequence to be effective it must be certain. But in many organizations we see that an at-risk behavior is punished when it results in an injury, but the same behavior goes unpunished when no injury occurs. What we're really doing in this case is punishing the injury, not the at-risk behavior, and people will see that. If this has any effect at all, it will be to teach people to hide injuries so they avoid punishment.

Another aspect of consistency is applying punishment regardless of who is performing the at-risk behavior. It is often the case that someone perceived as a good employee—who always gets the job done—or someone perceived by others as a favorite of the supervisor will not be punished where another employee has been in the past. This kind of inconsistency undermines management credibility and leaves the punished employee feeling that he has been treated unfairly. People with that perception are not likely to take discretionary efforts, for example reporting issues, making suggestions for improvement, or helping others.

2. Mixed messages

A related issue is that of mixed messages. Suppose I am a manager and I tell people that safety is my highest concern. My crew then breaks a production record, but in doing so takes shortcuts with safety procedures, without having an injury, and my response is to heap praise on them and buy pizza for everyone. I may not even realize that they took shortcuts, but they know, and they know I rewarded the outcome without asking about how they did it. What behavior have I reinforced? When they take the same shortcuts next month and someone is injured and there is discipline, I’ve again told my crew that the behavior that gets punished is reporting an injury, and I’m really only giving safety lip service.

3. Attribution bias

When a frontline worker does something at risk, what is your first thought about him and why he did it? Studies show that perceptions of an action differ depending on whether you are the person performing the action (the actor) or someone observing the action. The observer tends to interpret what happens by attributing actions to characteristics of the actor’s personality and disposition. So a supervisor would tend to attribute a behavior inconsistent with rules as being because the worker was a risk-taker or someone who was just not willing to follow the rules. But the actor tends to interpret what happens by attributing actions to the reasons the he took those actions—he was pressured to produce, didn't have enough time, didn't have the right equipment, etc.

This comes into play when we think about punishment because your perception of whether it’s deserved and the recipient’s perception of whether it’s deserved are likely to be different. The person who is being punished is likely to be thinking about the reasons the behavior was justified, while you are likely to be thinking about needing to fix that person’s bad attitude. When you are assuming the person’s behavior results from a bad attitude and the worker believes his or her behavior was justified, it’s inevitable that punishment is going to be resented.

4. Using discipline as a deterrent

A deterrent is something that discourages or is intended to discourage someone from some act. One of the reasons people use punishment is to discourage others from performing the same at-risk act that was done by the individual being punished. But this is very ineffective.

What people do is based most strongly on their own personal experience. I do something—e.g., drive above the speed limit—and have an outcome—e.g., I get to my destination sooner and have no accident or citation. As I keep doing that it builds my belief that I can drive safely at higher speeds and that encourages the behavior of driving fast which becomes habitual, that is, I don’t even think about the fact that I’m driving above the speed limit. Most of the time the results of this are positive and my judgment has been influenced by my experience in a way that hides the fact that I’ve increased my risk. The fact that I read about and hear about other people having car crashes because they were speeding doesn’t influence my behavior: my belief is that I can do it without bad outcomes.
5. Superficial understanding

We see someone violating a rule and we punish them. But have we stopped to understand the root cause of what we’ve seen? If people’s behavior is at odds with a safety procedure, why has that not been seen previously? Why has the supervisor or manager not addressed it? Is it possible that they are tacitly accepting it because they believe it helps them meet other objectives? Obviously we can’t know without some investigation. But often our imposition of punishment stops with the person performing the unsafe act and doesn’t consider whether there are others who are condoning the at-risk behavior. When employees know that the supervisor routinely sees them violating a procedure and takes no action, but they are subsequently punished (and the supervisor is not) when seen by a higher level leader or in the aftermath of an injury, they will of course feel the process is unfair.

Getting discipline right: Evaluating and improving your safety discipline system

To implement safety discipline, or evaluate and improve your safety discipline system, there are six steps to consider.

1. Look at the rules themselves.

It’s really best to focus discipline on life-saving rules—sometimes called cardinal rules. These should be rules that no one would tolerate violating – things like atmosphere testing before confined space entry. Employees should be able to tell you what’s safety critical and should agree that those rules are critical.

You also need to explain expectations and the reasons why these rules are in place. Blind obedience is far less effective than when people understand and believe in the importance of safety rules. Not only do most people reject blind obedience, but it leaves people less able to work effectively—they are not prepared to take initiative and get turned off so they don’t want to. An enabled workforce is your best asset for high performance. It provides motivation, initiative, and effort, which leads to better safety as well as better productivity.

Communicate about the life-saving rules so that there is widespread, consistent understanding. You will need to do this not just once but regularly. You want to avoid situations where anyone can say they didn’t know about, or forgot about, a life-saving rule.
2. Be sure that the behaviors required by the rules are enabled.

Some behaviors are enabled, that is, within the control of the employee. Other behaviors are non-enabled, that is, the employee can't do them even if he wants to. For example, if we require people working at height to tie off but there's no place to tie off for a particular job, that behavior is non-enabled. If we systematically look at exposure scenarios we can test whether the rules are enabled in a variety of situations.

3. Ensure that there's an effective mechanism for action when a rule cannot be followed.

We need to consider safety issue reporting for when someone recognizes in advance that following a rule might not be possible. But sometimes people recognize in the middle of a job that there's a barrier to following a rule, and for those instances there needs to be stop work authority that allows an employee to pause and get help in determining what to do.

For both the prospective situation and the mid-stream situation it is not enough to have created systems and procedures. We also need a culture that supports use of these systems. Creating that kind of culture depends on supervisors' and managers' safety leadership behavior. If we don't have effective procedures supported by the culture for addressing situations when a rule cannot be followed, there is little chance that the discipline system will be considered fair and equitable.

4. Clearly communicate about the consequences for violating a rule or procedure.

Those consequences should be predetermined and transparent. They should not be seen as subjective and up to the whim of the supervisor or manager on a case-by-case basis. There can be room for consideration of extenuating circumstances, but the types of circumstances and the process for assessing them should be clear and well understood.

5. Administer discipline consistently based on at-risk actions taken, not on the outcome of those actions.

In other words, do not discipline only when there is an injury while overlooking or excusing the same behavior in the absence of an injury. This may be the most common shortcoming in safety discipline, and it completely undermines the value of the discipline. If all or most of your safety discipline cases follow an injury, there is likely a consistency issue in your use of discipline.

6. Equip supervisors and managers with the skills to use discipline properly. They must know how to act consistently.

Frontline leaders must communicate effectively both about rules and the potential consequences of non-conformance, and about discipline as it is administered. They must be good at establishing expectations and providing feedback about performance, and be good at coaching their subordinates. They must convey knowledge and understanding of the operations and issues, and convey strong commitment to safety. When supervisors and managers have good safety leadership skills they are able to have the recipient of discipline, as well as other workers, feel the way you intend them to feel when they are disciplined. Many supervisors and managers need improvement in some or all of these areas, but if we do not build those skills it decreases the likelihood that the discipline system will achieve its objectives.

In summary

Discipline has a legitimate role in safety; however, done the wrong way or at the wrong time, discipline can undermine both safety and culture. Getting discipline right, specifically understanding what it is and its role within a complete safety system, contributes to high performance and greater reliability in reducing exposures. Effective discipline requires a systematic approach to establishing rules, ensuring that they are enabled, communicating about the entire process, and developing, communicating, and equipping supervisors to implement discipline.