THE LEADERSHIP GUIDE TO ENFORCING SAFETY RULES

Keys to Getting Safety Discipline Right
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We often hear managers claim the way to reduce injuries is to simply enforce rules and procedures for safe operations. Others say discipline should never be used because it’s inconsistent with building a collaborative culture that engages workers. Still others claim disciplining one individual deters others from doing the same undesired behavior.

Each of these perspectives misses the target. Rule enforcement alone can’t account for the myriad of factors that contribute to injury. Discipline doesn’t oppose engagement; most employees understand there are times it’s the right thing to do (if it’s done in the right way). And discipline is rarely an effective deterrent to rule breaking. Any influence it may have is easily overcome by other factors.

In this e-book, we dispel these common discipline myths, discuss the ways organizations struggle to administer punishment effectively, and provide concrete measures for improving your safety enforcement system.
Discipline is typically used to get people to follow rules or to change undesired behaviors to conform to organizational safety objectives. Leaders establish procedures to define safe work and to reduce exposure. But when rules are violated, the use of discipline often stirs up negative reactions. There are several reasons discipline doesn’t achieve the outcomes leadership desires, including:

• **Mistaken Intent** – Not every rule violation is intentional. An employee who is punished for violating a rule he believes he was encouraged to break (because of production demands or the total absence of enforcement, for example) can feel blindsided by discipline and become resentful to leadership.

• **Perceived Injustice** – Because discipline is not always executed with skill, individuals can feel unjustly embarrassed and singled out for actions the entire team had done in the past. Leaders should be cognizant of applying discipline uniformly across the entire workforce and holding everyone accountable for the same behaviors.

• **Decreased Morale** – When perceptions of unfair discipline are ripe among segments of the workforce, leadership must take action before low morale spreads across the entire organization. In the worst case, poorly administered discipline can unintentionally encourage people to hide vital exposure-control information or participate in malicious compliance, where individuals intentionally use safety rules to obstruct company goals.
Discipline is typically used to get people to follow rules or to change undesired behaviors to conform to organizational safety objectives. Leaders establish procedures to define safe work and to reduce exposure. But when rules are violated, the use of discipline often stirs up negative reactions. There are several reasons discipline doesn’t achieve the outcomes leadership desires, including:
The path to effective discipline has many pitfalls

Pitfall 1: **INCONSISTENCY**

When we discuss discipline in the workplace, what we’re really talking about is punishment: a consequence focused on reducing unwanted behavior. The word can cause some to recoil, but the role of discipline is to facilitate desired behavior—this may require punishment. Getting punishment right starts with applying consequences consistently. We know for a consequence to be effective it must be certain. Unfortunately, in many organizations consequences are viewed by employees as arbitrary, biased, or unfair. This happens when:

An at-risk behavior is disciplined only if someone gets injured.

If no injury occurs, the same behavior goes unpunished. The at-risk behavior should be the focus; otherwise, we are punishing people for getting hurt, which encourages individuals to hide injury to avoid punishment.

“Favorites” receive special treatment.

Sometimes “good” employees or those close to the supervisor aren’t disciplined for rule violations, while others (such as contractors) are punished. This weakens management credibility, divides the workforce, and makes it less likely people will report issues, make suggestions for improvement, or help others.

The message is mixed.

Managers often say safety is their top priority, but when they reward production records achieved through shortcuts and risky behavior, they are reinforcing attitudes that safety really takes a backseat.

“Consequences are viewed by employees as arbitrary, biased, or unfair.”
Pitfall 2: ATTRIBUTION BIAS

Attribution bias is when we infer the cause of a behavior based on our perception of the individual performing the action. For example, a frontline worker identified as a slacker does something at risk, and the conclusion is “he’s too lazy to follow procedures.” But when the go-getter does the same thing, her behavior is rationalized as “thinking outside the box.” This impacts discipline when the supervisor’s perception of whether punishment is deserved and the actor’s perception of why they violated a rule are in conflict. For example:

When we dig deeper, we learn that the “slacker” violated the safety rule because he was pressured to produce or was up against a surprise deadline or wasn’t provided essential equipment.

This person justifies the rule violation in the context of the organization’s unfair demands on him to finish a task without enabling him to do it safely.

If the supervisor doesn’t understand this person’s point of view, he is likely to assume the “slacker’s” behavior stems from a bad attitude.

The result is a punished and resentful employee, and a missed opportunity for leadership to identify opportunities to improve the safety system.
Pitfall 3: USING DISCIPLINE AS A DETERRENT

A deterrent is something that discourages or is intended to discourage people from a particular behavior. One of the reasons leaders use punishment is to make an example of a rule-breaker and thereby discourage the workforce from performing the same at-risk act. But using discipline to deter undesired behavior is rarely effective. This is because:

- People’s actions and choices are based on their personal experience.
  - If they violate a rule and nothing bad happens, they begin to believe that the rule is unnecessary or shouldn’t apply to them.
- If a co-worker gets hurt violating a rule, that incident won’t necessary influence the rule-breaker’s beliefs because their experience indicates they can take shortcuts without a negative outcome.
  - Leaders need to cultivate a culture that goes beyond rule compliance and promotes safety as a value essential to the work.

"Using discipline to deter undesired behavior is rarely effective."
Pitfall 4: SUPERFICIAL UNDERSTANDING

Leaders see someone violating a rule and they punish them. But have they stopped to understand the root cause of what they’ve seen? If people’s behavior is at odds with a safety procedure, leaders should take immediate action to understand why. No one intends to get hurt, but there are often extenuating circumstances for at-risk behavior. Production is one we’ve discussed, but there is also the attitude of supervisors and managers:

When at-risk behavior is frequent, it’s prudent to understand why site-level leaders failed to immediately address it.

Did they tacitly accept rule violation because they believed it would help them meet their goals? Discipline often stops with the rule violator and doesn’t take into account leaders who implicitly condone at-risk behavior.

Effective discipline targets not only frontline rule violators but also the supervisors who routinely “overlook” shortcuts.

When employees take the fall for an injury resulting from slack rule enforcement, they will naturally feel resentful toward supervisors who skate by unpunished.

“Have they stopped to understand the root cause of what they’ve seen?”
Organizations also need a culture that empowers employees to take control of safety and pause work when exposure changes.
GETTING DISCIPLINE RIGHT: HOW LEADERS CAN IMPROVE THE DISCIPLINE SYSTEM

To have an effective system of discipline, leaders need to know what they’re trying to accomplish. The goal is to improve risk recognition and gain the workforce’s commitment to safe behavior. That means getting agreement on the definition of safe behavior for each task and aligning the workforce to create a culture that drives consistency with the rules. Here are six ways organizations can get the most out of their safety rule practices.
Focus on Life-Saving Rules

Leaders need to explain expectations and the importance underlying life-saving rules or procedures that could result in fatality if violated. Blind obedience is far less effective than when people understand and commit to safety rules. Not only do most people reject blind obedience, they’re also less prepared to take initiative when safety is critical. Be sure to:

Differentiate between life-saving rules and other rules.
Life-saving rules are those no one would tolerate violating, such as atmosphere testing before confined space entry.

Train workers on the importance of the rules and what they mean to them, their safety, and the safety of others.

When workers understand the logic behind the rule, they are motivated to conform and encourage others to follow procedure.

Regularly communicate about the life-saving rules so there is widespread, consistent awareness.
Avoid situations where anyone can say they didn’t know about, or forgot about, a life-saving rule.

"Blind obedience is far less effective than when people understand and commit to safety rules."
Ensure Expectations are Enabled

Some behaviors are enabled or within the control of the employee. Other behaviors are non-enabled, that is, the employee can’t do them even if she wants to. Wearing a seatbelt when driving a car is enabled because all cars come equipped with seatbelts. But requiring employees to use a seatbelt on a bus that doesn’t have them is non-enabled.

Provide tools necessary for conformance.
If a rule requires people working at height to tie off, they must be given the equipment needed to tie off. If PPE is a condition of a particularly task, make it conveniently available to employees.

Systematically look at exposure scenarios to test whether the rules are enabled across a variety of situations.
Proactive efforts can identify opportunities to help workers meet expectations. One of the worst things leaders can do is demand conformance but not enable people to actually follow the rules.

"Some behaviors are non-enabled, that is, the employee can’t do them even if she wants to."
Provide Mechanisms for Action When Rules Can’t be Followed

Sometimes employees recognize that rules can’t be followed before they begin a task. Other times they identify barriers in the middle of a job. For each of those instances, there needs to be stop work authority that allows employees to pause and get help in determining what to do next.

**Empower workers to speak up.**

For both the prospective situation and the mid-stream situation, systems and procedures alone aren’t enough. Organizations also need a culture that empowers employees to take control of safety and pause work when exposure changes.

**Build a safety-first culture.**

Creating that kind of culture depends on the safety leadership of supervisors and managers. Without their support, people may hesitate to pause work for fear of punishment or ridicule. A strong culture prioritizes safety and respects individual input that helps the workforce follow the rules and limit exposure.

“There needs to be stop work authority that allows employees to pause and get help in determining what to do next.”
Define and Broadcast
Clear Consequences

Leaders should clearly communicate the consequences of rule violation. Punishment should be predetermined, transparent, and frequently expressed in oral and written form. Clear and regular reminders of the consequences of breaking safety rules prevents individuals from genuinely claiming ignorance, unfair punishment, or that someone else received preferential treatment.

Make consequences consistent.
Discipline should never be seen as subjective or arbitrary. Avoid situations that make it seem supervisors are enforcing rules on a whim or on an individual basis.

Allow room for flexibility.
There should be opportunities for considering extenuating circumstances, but the types of circumstances and the process for assessing them should be accessible and open.

“Discipline should never be seen as subjective or arbitrary.”
Enforce Consistent Consequences

Administer discipline consistently based on at-risk actions taken, not on the outcome of those actions. As mentioned above, never punish people for getting injured alone. Focus on behaviors, regardless if the result is a near-miss or a recordable.

Assess your disciplinary practices.
If all or most of your safety discipline cases follow an injury, there is likely a problem with how you enforce rules. Don’t excuse at-risk behavior because it didn’t result in injury. Luck won’t always hold up.

Differentiate between injury types.
Every rule doesn’t have to be treated equally. It’s helpful to have different consequences for life-saving rules and other rules. But for every category of rules, expectations should be transparent and execution of enforcement should be consistent.
Frontline leaders must have a strong command of the rules and the potential consequences of non-conformance. They should know how to clearly and rationally communicate the purpose and necessity of discipline to the affected employee. They must be effective at reinforcing expectations, providing feedback that encourages rather than discourages, and coaching subordinates to succeed.

Expand leaders’ toolkit.
All mid-line leaders should convey commitment to safety and have a working knowledge of exposure-reduction practices. When supervisors and managers have good communication and safety leadership skills, they can administer punishment in a way that is both fair and respected by the disciplined individual.

Improve feedback skills.
Discipline is effective when it’s balanced. Most employees follow the rules, but if they’re only given feedback on mistakes and violations, they may disengage from the safety process and withhold information needed to reduce exposure. Avoid focusing on failure and praise good performance.

“All mid-line leaders should convey commitment to safety and have a working knowledge of exposure-reduction practices.”
DISCIPLINE FOR A SAFER WORKPLACE

Discipline has a legitimate role in safety, but if it’s executed in the wrong way or at the wrong time, it can undermine safe performance and culture. Getting discipline right requires leaders to fully understand when it’s needed, how to apply it, and what its role is within a fully formed safety system. A mature discipline process contributes to high performance and greater reliability in reducing exposures. It never uses injury as its sole benchmark for punishment. Effective discipline involves a systematic approach to establishing rules, ensuring conformance is enabled, communicating the whole process to the entire workforce, and developing and equipping supervisors to use punishment judiciously to create a safer work environment for everyone.

If you’d like more information visit us at www.dekra-insight.com.