

When You've Been Disciplined at Work

We all have our bad days and performance difficulties from time to time. But too many of either can lead to consequences that put your job in jeopardy. Nearly all employers have a process for addressing employee problems. To manage performance, disciplinary measures (or adverse actions) exist in nearly all organizations. When discipline affects you, it's important to know what it means and how to respond constructively to it.

Discipline is not punishment. The goal of discipline is to deter a repeat of the performance problem (quality of work, attendance, availability, conduct, or attitude problem). Some offenses, such as theft or violence, are grounds for immediate termination in many companies, with no discipline or second chances—and no available recourse.



Behaviors That Result in Employee Discipline

■ All work environments have certain expectations and rules that employers expect workers to understand and honor. The violation of specific company policies are a common reason some employees get into trouble. These may include not turning in time-sheets, excessive absences and tardiness, and violating the rights of others.

After an initial warning, if the offense is repeated, then a careful sequence of documentation and steps is followed. Written warnings are discipline and are sometimes called “getting written up.” This creates a legally enforceable paper trail leading to termination if the behavior doesn’t change.

Other causes for employee discipline include quality of work issues, conflict, absenteeism, a poor attitude, gossip, insubordination and disruptive behavior—and in the last few years—abuse of company computers for personal business. Most employees who find themselves in trouble are fully aware of the policies they are violating, so claiming innocence through ignorance will get you nowhere fast.

Your Employer Is Not the Bad Guy

■ There is no financial incentive for employers to remain in conflict with employees. It may feel like the employer is “out to get you,” but the good news is that your employer isn’t interested in conflict. Your employer would much rather you be productive and happy on the job. Most employers have resources to help employees resolve conflict, and in many organizations, well-run organized labor representatives can help as well.

What’s Behind Employee Problems?

■ Employees do not plan on being disciplined, and all employees want to avoid being disciplined. So when an employee is disciplined, it is often an indication that personal problems are making a contribution—personal problems with behavioral symptoms that are difficult to control.

A bad attitude or disruptive behavior is often a symptom of deeper issues that can be addressed and remedied through counseling. If you are experiencing conflict with your supervisor, airing your concerns confidentially with

an employee assistance professional can help. Human resources is also an option. Another option is speaking to another level of supervision with your supervisor’s approval or after informing your supervisor that you intend to do so. Don’t bad-mouth your supervisor to coworkers. Do not go behind your supervisor’s back and don’t end run. If your complaint is worthy of being heard, you risk being ignored entirely if you do these things. It is always best to address your issues with your supervisor first, and then ask permission or let your supervisor know that you will be seeking guidance from another level of management.

The smartest thing you can do if you are disciplined is to meet with your employee assistance program, or if one is not available, a professional counselor who can discuss your situation objectively. Ask for an assessment, and see if you can rule out a personal problem, even if you are unaware of having one.

The best response to discipline is often humility and demonstrating openness to being coached. Discover what you did that contributed to the reason you were disciplined, get past this period, learn from it, and demonstrate a commitment going forward to more than satisfactory performance.