

What's positive about discipline?

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No one likes to give bad news. Maybe this is one of the reasons why supervisors and managers often fail to address issues with employees and team members in timely and meaningful ways. However, feedback on poor performance, conversations about unacceptable behaviour and administration of discipline fall squarely in the domain of managers and leaders that wish to build productive and effective teams.

Contemporary thinking has shifted from viewing discipline in a negative manner and it is now common to see the adjective "Positive" being used to describe the disciplinary process. Positive discipline is an approach that looks at discipline from the point of view of producing positive changes in an employee's behaviour or performance. Positive discipline is corrective and rehabilitative in its intention.

Every leader wants each member of their team to perform well, as this augurs well to their capacity as a leader. Last week my colleague shared on terminations and it is widely accepted that terminations, whether with cause or by resignation, are costly. Staff turnover costs a company. Managers and business owners invest resources, both time and money, into their employees and therefore they don't hire to 'fire'. Rather it is in their best interest to correct negative behaviours and therefore it is beneficial to adopt positive discipline within organisations, as a means of improving behaviour and performance to ensure a fully functional team.

For discipline to be seen as positive there are some essential elements that must be present. It must be:

- transparent
- consistently applied
- equitable and fair

With these elements in existence, employees more readily accept discipline when applied, and claims of favouritism are reduced and impartiality is increased.

In order for discipline to be effectively administered there are three (3) areas which management must pay attention to: disciplinary rules, communication and training. It is vital that disciplinary rules and procedures are clearly established. Codes of Discipline, Codes of Conduct and Operating Procedures let employees know what is expected of them. They articulate the values of the company and clearly state the penalties for infringement. With these firmly in place, employees will know the standard against which they will be measured and therefore everyone can be equitably assessed.

Communication is an essential feature of good management and directly impacts on the disciplinary process. How often do leaders communicate with their team members on their performance? There are too many instances where communication is relegated to the annual or bi-annual performance appraisal. The appraisal should be viewed as a summary of everything you would have discussed throughout the year in meetings and on-going activities, therefore whatever is stated would not be surprising and therefore easily agreed to. Additionally, employees need regular feedback on their performance so that any negative aspects can be highlighted early and corrective action taken. Where there is cause for serious disciplinary action, employees must be informed of what rule was breached, what should have been done and what is expected in the future. It is not sufficient to highlight the wrongdoing without giving an alternative course of action.

Earlier, the importance of consistency and equity was highlighted as an essential feature of positive discipline. This is only possible if all managers and supervisors within the organisation are knowledgeable on how discipline is to be administered. Management weakness is identified as one of the key predictors of disciplinary problems. How frustrating for an employee to know that his department punishes actions more severely than another! Alternatively, isn't it de-motivating to know that what is acceptable in one area of the organisation is frowned upon in another? It is critical that managers and supervisors learn to ask themselves if the employee has indeed breached a rule and what rule did they breach before proceeding to administer any form of discipline.

Discipline should always be conducted with the principles of natural justice in mind. The principles stipulate that decisions should be free from bias, and a fair hearing should be conducted. A fair hearing is one where the person is informed of what they have done and then given a chance to respond and present their case. An examination of the Employment Rights Act shows that these principles are incorporated into the disciplinary procedures.

Discipline is a fact of life that we have subject to since childhood. In organisations it becomes essential to maintaining values and culture. Embrace positive discipline as a tool to help your team members improve and you will reap the benefits of having engaged and productive employees.