

The Goals of Workplace Discipline

The goals of discipline

There are four general goals of discipline, namely rehabilitation, deterrence, prevention, and punishment.

(a) Rehabilitative and corrective goals of discipline

- The main purpose of disciplinary action should be to correct unacceptable behaviour and not punish it. Therefore, rehabilitation and corrective action should be the cornerstone of good discipline.
- Counselling is an important aspect of discipline and may be used before penalties are imposed in the case of minor misconduct.
- Progressive sanctions from verbal to written to final warnings may be used to encourage and direct an employee to change his/her behaviour. Improved behaviour should be encouraged and supported.
- The starting point of discipline will depend on the seriousness of the offence.
- A first minor offence will generally warrant a verbal warning (perhaps after initial counselling has proved ineffective), whereas a more serious offence may warrant a written or final written warning for a first offence.
- In the case of very serious misconduct which has the effect of making a continued employment relationship intolerable, corrective discipline may not be possible and dismissal could be the appropriate sanction.

(b) Deterrent action goals of discipline

- Deterrence or discouragement is considered when rehabilitation is not successful.
- Where an employee's behaviour fails to improve in spite of counselling and other forms of discipline, he or she may ultimately be dismissed. This will act as a deterrent to other employees.
- Where losses from petty theft are of serious concern to the employer, dismissal may be resorted to for the theft of a minor item (e.g. a bar of chocolate) in order to act as a deterrent.
- Suspension without pay may also be used as a less harsh alternative to dismissal, and this too will have a deterrent effect, both on the employee concerned and on other employees. There must, however, be an agreement to implement such a sanction as suspension without pay has contractual implications and it must be implemented after the employee has been given the opportunity to have their side of the story heard.

(c) Preventative goals of discipline

- Adequate control mechanisms are an important factor in controlling misconduct at the workplace.
- Preventative action may be taken where an offending employee is retained, for example by moving the employee to an area where the offence is unlikely to be repeated or restructuring the job to ensure stricter control mechanisms.
- This could involve a demotion, subject to the employee's agreement to the change in terms and conditions of employment and must be implemented after the employee has been given the opportunity to have his/her side of the story heard (make representations).
- If the employee does not agree to the demotion the employer would be entitled to proceed with the dismissal, provided that the offence is one that is serious enough to warrant dismissal.

(d) Punitive action goals of discipline

- Punitive action should not be encouraged when it comes to workplace discipline. It is often used when an employer is angry with an employee and may have the unintended consequence of co-employees seeing the employee as a victim of unfair treatment rather than a recipient of corrective or just disciplinary action.
- Employers should not use financial penalties, such as the withholding of wages, as disciplinary measures. However, requiring an employee to repay the losses caused by his / her misconduct should not be viewed as retribution, provided this is done in accordance with the Basic Conditions of Employment Act 75 of 1997. For example the withholding of pay in respect of a period of unauthorised absence is not a disciplinary sanction, but simply the application of the “no work, no pay” rule.