

14.11: The Purpose of Discipline

Learning Objectives

- Discuss the purpose of discipline



Every effective organization needs to establish, communicate and enforce standards of behavior and performance. Some employees will learn and adopt the organization's standards as a matter of course—by observation, in conversation with management and peers, by referring to a code of conduct or employee handbook and other means. However, some individuals will disregard, fail to meet or otherwise refuse to adhere to established codes of conduct or performance standards. In these instances, it's essential to enforce desired behavior to avoid contaminating the culture and a domino effect where one dysfunctional employee derails a work group or department or, worse, prompts the departure of high-performance employees.

In its active or verb form, discipline is defined as “[training] (someone) to obey rules or a code of behavior, using punishment to correct disobedience.”^[1] Merriam-Webster puts the emphasis on “training that corrects,” and that is a key point; the purpose of discipline is not to punish, but to instruct and correct. As DeCenzo, Robbins, and Verhulst note: “The object of disciplinary action is not to punish employees, but to provide a consequence for an employee's undesirable behavior.”^[2] That is, it is a necessary means to the desired end.

? PRactice Question

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The point of discipline is to change behavior. Specifically, to change ineffective or negative behavior into effective, positive behavior. For example, if an employee routinely submits deliverables late, the goal of employer action is to get the employee to submit work deliverables on time. Similarly, if an employee's work product consistently fails to meet expectations, the goal of disciplinary action is to get the employee to improve work quality and perform to expectations. These are difficult—but critical—conversations. As discussed in Module 9: Performance Management and Appraisal, a failure to take action, that is, to have a disciplinary conversation, is a management failure that increases the likelihood that the employee will flounder and fail (be fired) and has ripple effects on team and business performance and morale.

1. "Discipline." Lexico. Accessed September 12, 2019. ↵
2. DeCenzo, David A., Stephen P. Robbins, and Susan L. Verhulst. 2016. *Fundamentals of Human Resource Management*. New York, NY: John Wiley & Sons. ↵

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