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# How To Use Progressive Discipline for Employees

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As managers we all must deal with employee issues from time to time. You should have an established process for dealing with them. Your goal is to correct the issue and improve the employee. This is not about punishment for an employee. It is about using a system to help the employee return to being an effective member of your team.

## Using Progressive Discipline

In this article I will outline the steps used in progressive discipline. It is a clearly defined, step-by-step process to use when dealing with employee performance or conduct issues. Properly done it will correct any issue provided the employee is willing. It is fair to the employee and when used consistently provides you and your company with legal protection should termination of employment be needed.

## Progressive Discipline

Progressive discipline is a process a manager uses to deal with performance or other job-related issues. It is a defined process designed to help you and the employee overcome any issue.

Progressive discipline typically follows steps such as these:

- Coaching the employee about the issue.
- Verbal warnings (usually 2-3 at the most).
- Written warnings (usually 2 followed by a final written warning).
- Suspension or termination depending on the situation and the circumstances.

## **Employee Performance Log**

An Employee Performance Log is a documentation system that acts as both a memory tool and a record. It is a written record of performance issues, kudos and other noteworthy incidents that you want to have documentation on. It includes specific dates, times and incidents.

When you first notice an issue with an employee you should start documenting it in the employee performance log. Throughout the process of progressive discipline every meeting, incident and discussion should be documented.

It also serves as a tool for preparing written warnings and if needed a termination document. You will have specific issues, on specific dates with what was said by both sides. Should you have to appear before an unemployment appeal hearing you will be well armed with the facts.

Read more about using an employee performance log in the article [“Management Tool – Employee Performance Log \(PLog\) System”](#).

## **Coaching The Employee**

At the first sign of an issue you should start coaching the employee. Sit down with them and discuss the issue. Start out the conversation with “What can you tell me about (issue)?”. Allow them to explain what is going on first, then give them your perspective and offer guidance on correcting the issue.

Plan your coaching sessions even if they are informal pull aside chats. The goal is to correct the issue and lead the employee to improvement. Do not react emotionally or talk of further actions at this point. Be positive and encourage the employee. Tell the employee you have confidence that they can correct the issue.

When you coach the employee be sure they know what the issue is and the effect it is having. Clearly outline what is expected of them. If you have a company or department policy read it to them. Ask the employee how they can resolve the issue. This helps them understand there is a problem and this is what is going to be done to correct it.

One purpose of coaching is to find any underlying issues. An employee may have legitimate reasons for the issue. Medical issues, personal issues, or issues with other employees could be the root cause. Don't jump to conclusions until you sit down and gather the facts.

Follow-up regularly with the employee as long as the issue continues. After two or three face-to-face coaching sessions if the employee is not addressing the issue or performance does not improve it is time to move to the next step in progressive discipline.

## **Verbal Warnings**

A verbal warning serves notice to the employee that the issue is serious and must be corrected. A verbal warning is a written warning without signatures. The language should be the same including warning the employee that should the issue not be resolved it can lead to further disciplinary actions up to and including termination of their employment.

At this time if you have not already done so you should contact your Human Resources department to inform them of your issue and seek guidance. It is important to set up a working relationship with HR. They are the experts in the matter and can offer suggestions and guidance that can help lead to a positive outcome. You also need to be sure you are following company policy and processes.

Use the employee performance log as a guide to outline to the employee every incident and every coaching session. Clearly state to them that you are giving them a verbal warning so they understand this issue has progressed to the next level.

At the verbal warning stage deadlines for correcting the issue and specific actions the employee must take to correct the issue should be established. "You must be on-time for work each day which means no later than 8:05 AM. In two weeks we will meet again to follow-up on your progress."

Sometimes the mere act of escalating the a verbal warning is enough to jolt the employee into reality and performance will improve or the issue resolved. If not then it is time to move to the next step in progressive discipline. I usually only issue two verbal warnings before moving to the next step.

## **Written Warnings**

By the time you get to the written warning stage you have had at least 2-3 coaching sessions and given at least 2 oral warnings. The issue is clear and the employees unwillingness to turn things around demands escalation.

A written warning is very serious and should be given this way. Ask HR if they have a document you should use. Use the employee performance log to prepare the written warning. Outline in chronological order the specific issues and meetings you have had to try and correct them.

As with the oral warning give specific details of what is expected of the employee within a specified time frame. Include language that if the issue is not resolved it will mean further disciplinary actions up to and including termination of employment. Sign and date the document and ask the employee to do as well. If they refuse note on the document that the employee refused to sign.

At this point you can also include a "Performance Improvement Plan". This is a separate document that outlines the specifics of what is expected of the employee and the time frame. I have only used a PIP one time under the direction of HR. In a proper written warning the PIP language is already included in the document so there is no need for a second document.

Continue to coach the employee, but stick to the time frame of the first written warning. If the issue has not been resolved give them a second written warning, again with a specific time frame. If you reach the end of that time frame and the issue has not been resolved it is time to issue a final written warning.

A final written warning will differ in what specific actions are in the document should the employee not correct the issue. "You must be

on-time for work each day which means no later than 8:05 AM. If you are late even one day you will be suspended or your employment will be terminated.”.

A final written warning is open-ended. Notice no time frame was given with the expectation. Ask them if they understand the consequences if they do not correct the issue. Final does mean final and the employee needs to know this.

### **Turn Around or Termination**

I have only seen two outcomes using progressive discipline. The employee turns things around and the issues are resolved or the employee is terminated. We all hope they can turn things around, but if all else fails the only remaining course of action is termination.

The final written warning is open-ended so no further written warnings need to be given. If the employee corrects the issue for a month or two and then the issue returns there is no need to start progressive discipline over again. How long it is good for is up to you and HR.

It is 8:30 AM and your employee you have worked with for months is late again. You gave them their final written warning two weeks ago. Do you suspend or terminate? For me suspensions are only called for when there is an immediate need to address a serious issue such as verbal threats. Suspensions are on the spot corrective actions with no prior coaching or warnings needed.

In the case outlined here I would consult HR and move for termination of employment. Terminating an employee is one of the hardest things a manager does. But it comes with the job and sometimes must be done.

Draft a termination document outlining the issues and of all coaching, oral and written warnings with specific dates. The termination document should be as short as possible. It should end with language such as “We have worked with you for months to resolve this issue. To this date you have been unwilling to correct the issue. For this reason the decision has been made to terminate your employment immediately. There is no appeal. Our decision is final”. Send this document to HR for approval and setup a termination meeting with HR and security.

Sign and date the termination document before the meeting. Read the employee the termination document. After you read the document it is natural to want to say something. The truth is the less said the better. If you are compelled to say something let it be like “I wish things had worked out differently. Do you have any questions?”. Have the employee sign the document and stand up to show the meeting is over.

## **Summary**

Employee performance issues will happen. You should address them immediately with coaching to try and correct the issue. If that does not happen progressive discipline is an effective and fair process for dealing with employee issues.

Some employees may not even be aware of or think there is an issue. One coaching session may be all that is needed. Others may need further actions to jolt them into reality. The goal is to correct the issue and improve the employee.

You should document every incident and every meeting or conversation with the employee about the issue. Put specific times,

dates and details of the conversations in the documentation. An Employee Performance Log (PLog) is an excellent tool for this purpose.

You should consult with your Human Resources department once you reach the oral warning phase so they are aware of the situation. Some wait until the written warning stage, but by consulting with HR early you can get advice and guidance that could lead to a positive outcome.

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