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# Nine Steps to Employee Growth through Discipline

There comes a time in the life of every manager when an employee crosses the line. Whether on purpose or by accident every employee has made mistakes that justify discipline. But discipline is another of the subjects you'll be hard-pressed to find out much about in textbooks or business magazines. It's too bad really, because most managers get their skills at disciplining employees from how their parents or bosses disciplined them. And where did they get their skills? From their parents and bosses, of course!

It's like a lady who always cuts off the end of her roast before she put it in the pan. A friend asked why and she said, "Because my mother always did." So one day she asked her mother why she cut off the end of her roasts and her mother said, "Because your grandmother always did." When asked why she cut off the ends of her roast grandma said, "So they would fit in my small roasting pan!" Far, far too many managers provide discipline to their employees the way someone else did without much thought about whether it was a good approach.

To some managers, the words discipline and punishment are interchangeable, but nothing could be further from the truth. Mr. Webster says that punishment is, "a suffering, pain, or loss that serves as retribution," or "a penalty inflicted on an offender through judicial procedure." The word discipline comes from the Latin *disciplina* meaning teaching, or learning. Mr. Webster defines discipline as, "training that corrects, molds, or perfects the mental faculties or moral character." Perhaps that is why Dr. James Dobson named his best-selling book *Dare To Discipline*, rather than *Dare To Punish!* Given a choice, I would much rather work for a boss who understands and appreciates the differences between punishment and discipline.

There are occasions when a manager's best course of action is punishment. Some employees will steal, use drugs, or start fights. Under these circumstances punishment like demotion, probation,



or termination is the best solution. However, most employees need discipline far more frequently than they need punishment.

## **BUILDING THE FOUNDATION**

One of my favorite Bible verses is Proverbs 22:6, *“Train up a child in the way he should go: and when he is old, he will not depart from it.”* (KJV). Contained in this single verse is the wisdom we need not only to raise children, but to nourish employees. The first half of this verse says that we are to train our children in the way they should go. But what is the way they should go?

I think there are two elements. First we need to train on the basics; the morals, values, and basic standards. This is the foundation. Second, God gave every one of us a unique set of skills and gifts. We should recognize those gifts and develop them. Have you ever noticed how long it takes to do something you hate, and how quickly time passes when you’re doing something you love? Those things you love are God’s gifts. Some of us need to discover what our gifts are, and how to use them.

The second half of the verse is a promise, *“and when they get old they will not depart from it.”* When you build the foundation of values and morals, and then help a child discover and develop their gifts they will retain it all their lives. Of course, this verse was given as instruction to parents, but look at the application we, as managers, can make. First, we train our employees in the basics: job standards, values, and expectations.

Next, if we want to be productive, we find exactly the right place in the organization for every employee. Someone may be hired into sales, but is a natural for advertising. Someone hired into finance may be a natural with computers. Do you fire these people because they were hired into the wrong jobs? Do you berate their poor performance until they quit? Not unless you like incurring the added costs of hiring and training even more people, and you like discarding people like yesterday’s trash. If you do, you only need to look in the mirror to see the real problem in your company.

## **SEEK FIRST UNDERSTANDING**

Before you can consider whether or not to discipline, it is important to be clear about the entire situation. A verse from Proverbs says, *“Wisdom is supreme; therefore get wisdom. Though it cost all you have, get understanding.”* (Prov. 4:7). There isn’t much room for negotiating here; at all costs, get understanding.

Before you consider your disciplinary options ask yourself these four questions:



## **Why has discipline become necessary?**

Seldom is a situation as simple as it seems. An employee whose work has suddenly deteriorated, or is suddenly boiling-over emotionally, has something going on in their lives. It is not unusual for employees to exhibit poor behavior in order to get the attention they are seeking – even at the risk of getting yelled at by the boss.

## **Have I made my expectations clear?**

Before we consider how to handle situations that require discipline, let's step back and make sure that we aren't part of the problem. More often than not, managers are as culpable as their employees. The reason? Unclear or unreasonable expectations.

So many times I have gotten into a situation with an employee or another manager, and found that there were no very clearly understood and agreed to expectations. The boss always thought they had been perfectly clear. But the employees often don't really understand, they just shake their heads in agreement to get the boss out of their face. In other cases, the employee understands, but consents out of fear. In court this is called duress. Employees often feel they do not have the right to disagree with the boss so they nod their heads in agreement, even when they do not.

The other common problem with expectations is unreasonable demands. A boss will set a minimum performance level of producing 100 perfect widgets when the equipment can only deliver 90. Or a boss holds an employee's feet to the fire for producing 100 widgets even though the supplier didn't meet a delivery schedule.

If anyone deserves discipline in these scenarios it isn't the employee, it's the boss!

## **Am I consistent?**

Employees become frustrated and confused when they see inconsistent application of standards. If a report is due the first Friday of every month and you let it slide in January, then scream at late reports in February what are they to think? If you yell at one person, but not another, for turning in a late report what are they to think?

## **What is the best way to deal with the situation?**

Anger begets anger and defensiveness. Discipline, however unpleasant, builds character and performance; *“No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it.”* (Heb. 12:11). To make the most of the discipline you administer you need to think through the entire situation from what caused the problem, to what you want as an outcome, to what is the best approach with this employee.



## DISCIPLINE BASICS

Effective discipline is a learned skill. Here are nine elements of growth discipline:

### 1. COOL YOUR JETS.

The ability to control yourself is as important as your ability to discipline others; “*How can you say to your brother, ‘Brother, let me take the speck out of your eye,’ when you yourself fail to see the plank in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the plank out of your eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother’s eye.*” (Luke 6:42).

The time to discipline is not when you are angry. Get control of yourself, then proceed.

### 2. GET THE FACTS.

Remember the famous line from Sergeant Joe Friday of the TV show *Dragnet*, “Just facts ma’am, just the facts.” Innuendo and guess-work are not the basis for growth discipline; only facts. There are four key things to consider:

- *Check the employee’s record.* Review employment records and personnel files to know as much about the individual as possible.
- *Check for previous problems.* Is this the first error this employee has made? Is it the first of this type, or is this a habitual problem for this employee?
- *See for yourself.* Whenever possible physically examine the plant, the machine, or the office where the error occurred to get a better understanding of what happened.
- *Estimate the costs.* An insurance adjuster always estimates the damage to your car before he says it is totaled. Likewise, you should estimate the cost of the error. Be careful not to make mountains out of molehills. On the other hand, if the error is costly be prepared to explain why.

### 3. BUILD THE RIGHT CLIMATE.

Creating the right climate will make your discipline more effective:

- *Watch your attitude.* Let the employee see that you want to correct a situation rather than beat them into submission.
- *Find the right place.* Select a private, neutral place to administer discipline. No employee relishes criticism in front of co-workers. A neutral place like a small conference room will provide a more open atmosphere where the employee will feel less threatened.

### 4. PREPARE AHEAD.

Being organized is key and requires advance preparation. Here are four steps to help you stay organized:



- *Purpose.* Organize the material around the main purpose of the meeting: training that will lead to increased performance.
- *Specific.* Be very specific with your comments. Avoid general terms like, “You always,” or “You never.” What you “think” is not important, only the facts.
- *Goal.* Decide ahead of time what improvement you’re expecting. But remember that the employee will be more likely to work toward a goal he or she sets versus one you impose.
- *Balance.* Most employees do most things right. Don’t let this turn into a gripe session where you haul out a laundry list of every petty thing that has ever gone wrong and thereby ignore the good things the employee has done.

## 5. BE FAIR.

Three keys to fairness include clear job expectations, treating employees alike, and knowing what you’re qualified to do:

- *Focus on job expectations not on personalities.* Whether you like someone shouldn’t matter. Focus on the behavior that needs correcting, not on the individual. Jesus hated the sin, but loved the sinners.
- *Being fair is tough.* Not because you want to treat some people better than others, but because it is our nature to treat people we like better than ones we don’t. We are commanded, “*Use honest scales and honest weights.*” (Lev. 19:36). The verse doesn’t say to be fair to just the people you like.
- *Know your limits.* Some employees need professional counseling. Don’t be afraid to refer employees to professionals who can help them.

## 6. PLOT A NEW COURSE.

The purpose of growth discipline is to train and develop the employee. The way you do this is very important.

- *Opening remarks.* Set the stage carefully. Your objective is honest, open two-way communication.
- *Are you to blame?* You may think you know everything but ask the question “Am I to blame?” If you contributed to the problem in the eyes of the employee you need to address it up front.
- *Listen.* The tongue is a nasty little animal to control, but put a muzzle on it while you listen to what the employee has to say. You may have jumped to the wrong conclusion, and if not, you’ll at least confirm your understanding.
- *Focus on behavior.* Criticize what was done (or not done), not the person. Growth discipline requires the employee maintain their dignity as you work together. Calling someone names, questioning their mental capacity, or referring to the type of boots their mother wore is not appropriate.



## **7. BE POSITIVE.**

Discipline should be focused on improving performance for next time rather than on criticizing current mistakes. This doesn't mean you overlook the cost of the mistakes, but focus on how to avoid them in the future. As important as your first words are, don't overlook the opportunity to close on a positive note. It is the best way to encourage an employee to improve.

## **8. EMPLOYEE INVOLVEMENT.**

An employee who is asked for solutions to a problem will have to think the situation through carefully, and may come up with better ideas than you did. Even though the employee made a mistake that required discipline doesn't mean they aren't a valuable resource in developing a solution.

## **9. FOLLOW-UP.**

The only thing worse than not disciplining an employee is doing it and then not following-up. Employees who make the effort to improve deserve recognition. For those employees who do not improve, regular follow-up meetings will bring their shortcomings to light.

## **One Final Thought**

Remember, discipline is training and teaching. Growth discipline occurs when you focus on helping an employee grow through the process. This kind of discipline is completely different than punishment. Punishment is a course you take when attempts at discipline have failed. It may include probation or as a last resort, termination.

Discipline is best administered as close to the time of the error as possible. Let the employee know specifically what the problem is and how it varies from the expectations. Make sure that you have not been part of the problem. Ask the employee to develop a plan to correct the problem or to insure that it does not come up again. This is where real growth in growth discipline occurs: when the employee figures out for himself or herself what went wrong and what to do about it. Make sure as you conclude that the employee knows that their contributions are highly valued.

Realize, when it's done, it's done. Don't bring it up again. Covering the same ground over and over is a great way to crush the employee's spirit. This is not discipline, it is revenge!



## Words to Ponder

“What we do on some occasion will probably depend on what we already are; and what we are will be the result of previous years of self-discipline.” *H.P. Liddon*

“Blessed is the man whom God corrects; so do not despise the discipline of the Almighty.” *Job 5:17*

“The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge, but fools despise wisdom and discipline.” *Proverbs 1:7*

“He who heeds discipline shows the way to life, but whoever ignores correction leads others astray.” *Proverbs 10:17*

“No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it.” *Hebrews 12:11*

“Character does not reach its best until it is controlled, harnessed, and disciplined.” “Buy the truth and do not sell it; get wisdom, discipline and understanding.” *Proverbs 23:33*



# Cases in Real Life

## BACKGROUND

Earl is a national sales manager for a major division of a Fortune 500 company. He was recently promoted to this position from a lower level management in another division that operated quite differently.

In the new division there are contracts offered to all customers for cooperative merchandising. As national sales manager Earl does not have total profit and loss responsibility, but he is responsible for meeting budgets and the coop program is a big part of the budget. If he comes in on target or below, the division can usually meet its profit target. The profit target is something Earl's boss, the general manager, is responsible for. If the coop budget is not met, it is nearly impossible for the division to make its profit target. Earl's old division didn't have this kind of budget item so he doesn't have any experience with it.

## SITUATION

Four months into the new job, Jerry, the general manager, asks Earl for a status report on the coop budget. Earl doesn't know anything about coop budgets. Unfortunately, his finance manager reports that Earl's division has already exceeded the six-month budget with two-months to go in the period! Earl reports the status of the coop budget to Jerry.

Jerry goes absolutely ballistic. There is no way he can meet his division profit target given how far over budget the coop ad fund is. Jerry knows he will now have to go to the vice president and reduce his division's profit forecast. This is not a career enhancing move.

Jerry screams so loud at Earl that he can be heard two offices away despite the closed door. The harangue continues for 30 minutes. Jerry orders Earl to find a solution to the problem, and he doesn't care how.

Earl seeks out the expertise of his financial guru. The finance guy comes up with a three point plan: reduce coop spending to the bare bones, carry some of the costs into the next period, and freeze all raises and eliminate overtime for the next two-months. This, according to the finance man, will allow Earl to come in slightly over budget on the coop program, but in line overall.

Earl enacts the three-point program and comes in on budget. Jerry is thrilled because he hasn't had to reduce the division's profit commitment. But a month later, the results of the finance plan start coming in; with no coop money the division's market shares dropped, and customers experienced short-shipments and late deliveries because there was no overtime allowed. Jerry goes ballistic again for allowing the shares to drop and creating so much customer



dissatisfaction. He gives Earl a new office without a window and thirty days to explore “alternate employment” options.

## **WHAT WENT WRONG?**

Most of the growth discipline rules were broken in this situation. First, Jerry is largely responsible for the problems because he never sat Earl down and explained the budget responsibilities until it was too late. Then he issued a “fix it or else” ultimatum and terminated Earl when he didn’t like the way Earl fixed the problem.

When Jerry uncovered the problem he didn’t train, he exploded. The ultimatum caused Earl to make other poor decisions, and once again without any guidance from Jerry. Jerry should have been involved in Earl’s plan from concept to execution. After the profit number was delivered Jerry was happy about Earl’s results until he found out how they were achieved. Again, he should have known what the plan was all along.

## **SUMMARY**

Jerry never provided “growth discipline” for Earl. What he provided was punishment. After he found out about the budget issue Jerry should have realized that he was part of the problem and sat down with Earl to explore viable, responsible options for dealing with the issue. Had he done that he would have trained Earl in important aspects of the business, and helped Earl grow professionally. Instead, he caused the turnover of an excellent manager in whom the company had invested a lot to develop and bring along this far.



# Meeting Notes

Use these meeting notes to build your manager's understanding of the role of *growth discipline* in your company.

- 1) Define punishment and discipline. Ask people for examples of both. Ask people for examples of when to use punishment versus discipline.
- 2) Discuss each of the discipline basics:
  1. Cool Your Jets.
    - a. Don't consider disciplining when you're angry.
  2. Get The Facts.
    - a. Check the employee's record.
    - b. Check for previous problems.
    - c. See for yourself.
    - d. Estimate the costs.
  3. Build The Right Climate.
    - a. Watch your attitude.
    - b. Find the right place.
  4. Prepare Ahead.
    - a. Purpose.
    - b. Specific.
    - c. Goal.
    - d. Balance.
  5. Be Fair.
    - a. Focus on job expectations.
    - b. Being fair is tough.
    - c. Know your limits.
  6. Plot A New Course.
    - a. Opening remarks.
    - b. Are you to blame?
    - c. Listen.
    - d. Focus on behavior.
  7. Be Positive.
  8. Employee Involvement.
  9. Follow-Up.
- 3) Discuss several discipline scenarios common to your business and how they might be handled.



## Discipline Errors: The Ten Worst Discipline Mistakes

- **Unclear Expectations.**  
Too many bosses think they have made themselves perfectly clear when nothing could be further from the truth.
- **Yelling.**  
Yelling may be a good way to get someone's attention but employees will quickly learn to tune you out.
- **Demanding Immediate Compliance.**  
Bosses who demand immediate compliance may get what they want in the short run, but not the employee empowerment they want in the long run.
- **Nagging.**  
You know how a nagging spouse or in-law makes you grind your teeth? If you don't want the same reaction from employees, don't be a nag!
- **Lecturing.**  
You may be the silver tongue award winner in your office, but a monologue is only good for impressing yourself, not your employee.
- **Anger Transfers.**  
Yelling at an employee because you just got chewed out, or overreacting to a minor infraction causes undue stress for you and the employee.
- **Belittling.**  
Talking down to an employee is not how you build them up.
- **Trapping.**  
Lying in wait and pouncing on an employee destroys your trust and creates defensive employees.
- **Creating Guilt.**  
The employee is not responsible for your problems as a boss – you are. Do not make employees feel guilty because you are having difficulties.
- **Coercion.**  
If you have to coerce your employees to do something the problem is not with them!