10 of the Worst Mistakes Bosses Make With Employees

Most companies are full of employees with boundless enthusiasm, energy, understanding, tolerance, flexibility, and top-notch job skills. What? Not so at your company?

If your company is not perfect or if some of your employees occasionally miss the mark, then discipline is a practical skill you need as a manager. The trouble is most of us do not think about disciplining employees as being a skill. Discipline usually falls into the "immediate reaction to disaster" category. As managers, we go to classes to learn how to use our computers, attend leadership seminars, etc., but rarely – if ever – do we devote time to learning about or refining our skills as disciplinarians.

Discipline is hardly a new concept. The first occurrence of Biblical discipline occurs in Genesis when God gives Adam instructions about not eating fruit from the tree of knowledge (Gen. 2:16-17). The last example of Biblical discipline occurs in Revelation when God warns not to add or take away anything from the Bible (Rev. 22:18-19).

There are several words in the Old Testament that translate to discipline and they occur over 100 times. One word means verbal discipline, another means either verbal or physical discipline. The definitions of these words focus on the purpose of discipline being to instruct, or correction that leads to education.

Mr. Webster adheres to the Biblical definition, saying that discipline is *"training that corrects, molds, or perfects the mental faculties or moral character."*

For all the time we take learning to be better leaders and managers, we spend precious little time considering how to provide good discipline: *"training that corrects or molds."* Here are a few of the most obvious discipline errors and some constructive alternatives.

1. YELLING

Yelling is a great way to vent frustration, but it is seldom an effective tool in a manager's tool bag. Employees of bosses who yell all the time soon learn to tune them out.

Proverbs tells us, "*Do not associate with a man given to anger; or go with a hot-tempered man*" (Prov. 22:24). Why not? The answer comes in Proverbs 29:22: *"An angry man stirs up strife, and a hot-tempered man abounds in transgression."*

If your objective in yelling is to build up strife in your organization, then yell away. Otherwise, learn to control your temper and avoid speaking until you can control yourself.

2. DEMANDING IMMEDIATE COMPLIANCE

When was the last time someone told you, "Do it now, I don't care what you think?" Do you recall feeling inspired? Were you in awe at being in the presence of a remarkable leader, or did you feel unappreciated, lower than pond scum?

If your goal is to inspire your employees, a better approach is to make a firm request and follow up with praise for good behavior. It is amazing how much gets done when a little praise is handed out on a regular basis.

3. NAGGING

Don't think for a minute that nagging is the perquisite of in-laws. An amazing number of bosses exhibit this irritating behavior as well.

A boss who nags about little things all the time is wearisome indeed. Proverbs suggests, *"It is better to live in the corner of a roof, than in a house shard with a contentious woman"* (Pro. 21:9).

If you want happy, enthusiastic employees, avoid being a crabby, nagging boss.

4. LECTURING

Ahh, the joys of a good lecture! Remember when you were a teenager? About two minutes into your parent's monologue you knew where the conversation was going, and you tuned out. Your parents knew you tuned out because they would yell (see #1), "Are you listening to me?" The problem with lectures is that they are one-sided, boring, and often do not address the real problem.

Rather than lecturing, provide a little time to let emotions subside, and then get the employee involved in helping find a solution to the problem.

5. TAKING ANGER OUT ON EMPLOYEES

Been under a little stress lately? Who hasn't in today's business environment? You've heard the saying "the calm before the storm." In today's business, there's little hope for anything other than fleeting moments of calm.

Stress is one of the major reasons bosses take out their wrath on unsuspecting employees. Avoid it at all costs. There's nothing like an unwarranted flare-up to take the morale out of the troops.

6. SHAMING AND BELITTLING

Another favorite of some of the less sensitive bosses out there is shaming people into submission. Comments like "How could you be so stupid?" or "That's the dumbest idea I ever heard!" are typical. To be really effective, these comments are often offered in front of the employee's peers.

Making an employee feel insignificant will not build up the employee. Rather, pay attention to what you say, focus on the facts, be positive, and keep your own emotions under control.

7. SETTING TRAPS

Bosses who set traps to catch employees making mistakes, lying, etc., are among the employees' "favorites." What self-respecting, enthusiastic employee wouldn't want a boss who made work like walking through a live mine field?

Trickery and subversion may be fine for the CIA, but not for you. Be direct when you confront employees with a problem.

8. IMPOSING GUILT

Some bosses have the unique ability to make employees feel guilty for *their* failures. When the boss misses a deadline and loses a customer, it becomes someone else's fault for not reminding him to get the bid in on time.

Make sure before you discipline an employee that you aren't part of the problem. If you are, take responsibility for your part and be proactive in developing a solution.

9. PHYSICAL ABUSE

While we may not have foremen punching out employees today like in the old west, there are still some bosses who take physical action against their employees. It may be as simple as getting nose-to-nose with someone, or more obvious when tempers get out of control and someone gets

pushed or shoved. Physical abuse also includes bosses who try to discipline employees by forcing them to do dangerous work they are not prepared or trained to do.

10. COERCION

Coercing an employee to do something by threatening their job security, working hours, etc., is a favorite disciplining technique of some bosses. Coercive bosses like the feeling of power that comes when they get someone to do things their way through real or implied threats.

Coercion leaves an employee feeling completely powerless. This is not the feeling you want if you are trying to develop an "empowered organization." Avoid coercion by *leading* your employees, not by dragging or punishing them.

GETTING STARTED

You have probably been on the receiving end of some of these ten discipline mistakes. Perhaps as a boss you have even fallen into the habit of using some of them.

Providing poor discipline can do nothing but lower employee productivity, while providing good discipline – discipline that leads to education – can do nothing but improve productivity. Here are ten suggestions for how you can provide discipline that leads to education.

1. COOL OFF

Check your temper. People do make mistakes, sometimes costly ones. If the mistake has caused your anger to flare, take some time to cool off. It is best to discipline yourself before trying to discipline others.

2. GET THE FACTS

Joe Friday on the TV show *Dragnet* used to say, "Just the facts ma'am, just the facts." As you consider disciplining an employee, make sure that you are dealing with just the facts. Check the employee's past record, check the frequency of the error, review the background of the problem, and estimate the "cost" of the problem. Do not make mountains out of molehills, but if the error is a costly one, explain why it is costly.

3. CHECK YOUR ATTITUDE

In Jesus' ministry, you do not see him exploiting the power of his position as the Son of God. You do, however, see Him use his authority to discipline others. Avoid handling a discipline situation by exerting your "power" as a boss. Approach your employee with the attitude that you simply want to help them do better.'

4. RIGHT TIME AND PLACE

The right time to handle discipline problems is as soon after the problem occurs as possible, after your tempers has cooled and you have the appropriate facts. Never let the problem go uncorrected so long that people do not remember the incident clearly.

The right place to handle the problem is whenever it can be done privately. Employees find it hard to forgive bosses who rail them in front of their peers.

5. CLEAR COMMUNICATION

Clear communications are important to effective handling of discipline problems. Here are a few tips: organize your materials, think about what you will say and how, be specific and concise, avoid overreacting, and focus on moving toward improvement.

6. BE FAIR

First, focus on your attention on job expectations and not on personalities (unless, of course, the personality is the problem). Second, treat people alike. Avoid the temptation to discipline the person you like differently than the person you dislike.

7. PLAN THE OUTCOME

Remember, your objective is to provide discipline that educates, so plan how the session can be used to improve the performance of the employee. Think about what you will say first. This will set the tone for the discussion. What you will say last is what will be remembered. Stay focused on correcting the behavior and improving performance, not on the individual.

8. STRESS THE POSITIVE

Be clear that your intention is to improve performance by correcting a current mistake. Face the mistake head-on and focus on what improved performance will mean to the employee.

Ask the employee for suggestions in correcting the problem. In today's complex business environment, we often have developed systems that generate mistakes rather than helping to avoid them, and your employee may have the best ideas for fixing the problem. Also, getting an employee's involvement leads to ownership of the solution, and ownership leads to heightened levels of commitment.

9. SEEK INVOLVEMENT

You are the boss, you have all the facts, and you have called the meeting. In this position of power, it is very easy to fall into the trap of starting the conversation and never shutting up.

Learn to ask questions all the way through the session. Questions should be used to confirm your understanding of the situation, the problem itself, and the potential solutions. Keep your employee involved in the discussion by asking lots of questions.

10. FOLLOW-UP

Do not leave the session thinking the problem is solved and will never come back. If you do, you are part of the problem, not the solution. Plan during the session when follow-up will occur and what should be expected of the employee. Make sure that you are available to the employee for additional clarification if questions come up after your meeting. Recognize the progress your employee is making by giving praise for progress.

ONE FINAL THOUGHT

Some bosses handle disciplinary sessions as though they were putting on armor and going to battle. When you are faced with your next disciplinary problem, remember that your objective is to provide instruction that leads to education. Only this will lead to the long-term productivity gains that you want.

Remember also that Jesus forgave sinners, and we are commanded to be like Jesus. As your next disciplinary session is about to begin, the only "armor" you should be putting on is the armor of God; particularly the breastplate of righteousness (Isa. 59:17).