

Discipline

Do you take disciplinary action when you should?

By Herb Levine
SmartAnswers Correspondent

"How do you deal with the worst employees in the federal government?" That's the question Robbie Kunreuther, director of the training firm Government Personnel Services, posed to participants at a training conference -- Dealing with Performance and Conduct Issues -- in Seattle.

Kunreuther told the 25 federal supervisory employees gathered by the Seattle Federal Executive Board that "the people who drive other folks crazy" only make up a small percentage of the federal workforce.

Unfortunately, he said, many good federal employees believe that "management is impotent to do anything about those people." Why, he asked, don't some managers take disciplinary action when they should -- and know they should?

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Discipline works

Discipline is not just a matter of getting rid of bad employees, Kunreuther explained. Whether you wind up firing an employee, discipline can be useful because:

- It may correct the problem.
- It focuses the employee's attention on the rules in question.
- It helps preserve the morale of other employees who are not breaking the rules.
- It can increase everyone's awareness of the rules.
- It often increases people's respect for the supervisor.

Kunreuther noted that the positive effect of discipline on the rest of the workforce was at least as important as its effect on the targeted employees, if not more so.

But if discipline can be so useful to supervisors, Kunreuther challenged participants, why don't they do it more often "even when it is obviously warranted"?

They don't know how

Some said they hesitated to discipline because they did not know how. That is, they lacked basic knowledge of procedures and had not received any training until they took this course.

Another problem was not having HR support in the same office. Participants work in small or isolated facilities throughout Washington state and some as far away as Montana, and their servicing HR office is a state or two away.

They are afraid

Participants also mentioned that supervisors are frankly afraid of the time and paperwork a disciplinary action would take. Kunreuther agreed that discipline takes work. However, he pointed out that disciplinary actions take far less work than performance actions, with their requirement for performance improvement plans, and should be used whenever possible.

Kunreuther also said that discipline begins long before formal actions. Informal discipline frequently works and requires little in the way of paperwork.

Participants said supervisors may also not discipline because they are:

- Afraid of confrontation in an adversarial system.
- Afraid their attempt at discipline will be unsuccessful.
- And above all, afraid the employee will fight back.

Employees, participants said, have many ways to fight back:

- Doing the minimum.
- Denying facts and challenging you to prove them.
- Accusing you of something in turn.
- Spreading discontent among coworkers.
- Filing grievances or EEO complaints.
- Pointing the finger elsewhere.

These fears are real and point back to the need for greater supervisory knowledge and training. Kunreuther noted that supervisors facing these negatives should also consider the negatives of not disciplining.

As for the last point, when employees facing discipline -- or their unions -- respond, "Other people have done it, and they weren't disciplined," Kunreuther recommended you reply, "Who are they? I'll go after them as well." That, he said, usually ends the matter.

The organization will not support them

Participants also said organizations do not always support supervisors who discipline. This is not simply, or even primarily, a matter of support from HR. The bigger problem can be a lack of support from higher management.

Kunreuther said supervisors who discipline when it is needed and follow proper procedures generally do not have to worry if employees appeal to third parties. They face a more serious problem from their own managers who "are not trained judges" and who may misunderstand the case and not see the need for discipline.

In fact, participants said, they feared that if they disciplined, their managers might see them as the problem, not the employee. Participants generally agreed that in order for discipline to succeed, higher management must be made to understand the need.

'He's my best employee'

Finally, some participants noted they were reluctant to discipline valued people for rule breaking. But Kunreuther pointed out that it was not necessary to fire people, or even to take formal discipline.

With an otherwise good employee, a simple oral admonishment might solve the problem and avoid all the

negative effects that come when misconduct is tolerated, even in your "best employee."

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