

Change and Transition

“If you can only see one path, you are lost”

It is important we understand the difference between change which is an event and transition which is how we adapt to changes when they occur.

- Δ Adaptation to change includes relinquishing “what was”; letting go of people, ways of work, customs or structure.
- Δ A period of confusion, fear, longing for the certainty of the past and active resistance is a normal phase for people to go through. Change guru William Bridges describes this as the “Neutral Zone”, a time between the past and the future where new beginnings occur.
- Δ When managing change definitely DO:
 - ∪ *carefully describe what is changing and what is not.* Employees need to know not everything changes even though it sometimes feels as if this is what is happening.
 - ∪ *Plan It, Do It, Fix It.* This means you must have a plan for implementing the change, no matter how small or large. Next you must implement the change – just having a plan is not enough. Then adjust the plan, repair your mistakes – no plan and no implementation of change is ever perfect.

- o *create ceremonies or celebrations* to help people find closure. Respecting the past and understanding the value of history does not bind us to it. To the contrary, it helps take lessons from the past into the future. Encourage people to take a souvenir (physical or emotional) from “what was”.
- o *support the grieving process*. Denial, hostility, withdrawal, avoidance, confusion, anxiety and sadness are all steps in making peace with what is changing. Reassure employees that although it is uncomfortable and sometimes even painful, these feelings are a normal part of experiencing change.
- o *identify who is losing what* and work actively to improve the situations for people who are most likely to be negatively impacted by the change. Acknowledge these losses honestly. Those who benefit from the change will respect you for treating others with compassion.
- o *keep communication channels wide open*. Create new ways of talking with and listening to people. If you thought you were an approachable supervisor before change occurs, then invent new ways to be more accessible.
- o challenge people to *find ways to re-connect* with each other and to find new people with whom they can become connected
- o *bend rules and develop new policies* or procedures to aid people during transition. New policies may be permanent or short-term.

- ∪ look for the people who are experiencing work overload or significant stress as a result of the change. *Develop strategies for practical and emotional support.*
- ∪ *look for opportunities to innovate*, to be creative and to leap forward. These opportunities exist solely because of the thawing of old customs and the imprecise understanding of all aspects of the future ways of work.
- ∪ most (if not all) change is a response to a problem or issue needing to be addressed. Be clear about what problem the proposed changes are addressing. *Educate everyone about what the problem is.* When employees come to grips with the nature of the problem, they are more able to accept the solution driving the change.
- ∪ *remain open to course adjustments along the way.* Even the wisest managers cannot anticipate or plan perfectly for all of the secondary impacts that change may have. Employees may propose improvements on the original plan. Having only one path, and sticking rigidly to it, is likely to create resistance you would like to avoid.
- ∪ *involve employees in decision-making* wherever possible and especially when results of decisions affect them directly. This is an opportunity to build new forms of teamwork and trust.
- ∪ *celebrate* along the way. Look for small indicators of success and draw people's attention to progress

being made. Many supervisors are overly intent on the end point of a change process – they are too focused on the big goal.

- o when employees pose questions or point out problems with change implementation, *ask them to propose solutions* that would address the problem or answer the question. Be prepared to help them refine their solutions to be practical and congruent with the changes being implemented. If the solutions are reasonable, you'll also be expected to support their implementation!
 - o *practice self-care strategies*. As a supervisor, your workload and stress level increases when change occurs. Remember the *value of having a life outside work*. Eat well. Rest, play and nurture your spirit. Ensure each day has balance, not just work.
- Δ When managing change definitely:
- o DON'T *create a series of small changes* believing this is easier to adjust to than one large change. To the contrary, employees may feel that the changes are never ending or there is a bigger “hidden” agenda or master plan at play. Most implementation of major changes is incremental - taking a series of steps to accomplish. This is fine as long as, at the outset, employees understand the magnitude and long term outcome of the changes.

- ⊆ DON'T *underestimate the time* it will take to implement changes and for people (including you!) to make necessary transitions.
- ⊆ DON'T *isolate yourself*. Being on the hot seat during periods of change is sometimes uncomfortable. You will find yourself not having all the answers to questions asked by employees. Ducking the questions or the employees who are asking them ultimately makes the process more painful and time consuming. It may cause real issues to go underground inside the organization. These issues have not disappeared, they are hiding, waiting to resurface so they may be managed properly. Do yourself a favour – *handle these issues when they come up the first time*.
- ⊆ DON'T *minimize or misrepresent* the significance or the impact on people caused by change. Maintenance of trust-based relationships is crucial during periods of change. After new systems and procedures are in place, it is trust among employees and supervisors that enables new ways of work.
- ⊆ DON'T *involve everyone in every phase* of change implementation. This will slow the change process. It also may be an invitation for resistant employees to negatively influence others. Find a balance of involvement by employees and of supervisory and managerial leadership and decision-making.
- ⊆ DON'T *vest too much authority or responsibility with the hardest working people*. This may cause others

to feel left out. It also may make you appear to be less available or that the organization's leadership is defaulting to people in less responsible positions.

- o DON'T *be too quick to reprimand or discipline people who are resisting the change*. These employees are struggling with their adjustment to how the changes impact them. Ask questions about how the employees are being impacted, what do they need, and how can you help them cope or adapt to what is happening? This helps ensure resistance is addressed positively.
- o DON'T *substitute style or superficial gestures for genuine caring*. Employee's intuition tells them when you are "being real" and when you are "faking it". Employees may regard your "nice behavior" as an attempt to compensate for the damage caused by the change.
- o DON'T *make up answers to questions you can't answer yet*. Employees often ask questions about details of how the changes will impact them, their work area, clients/customers. Supervisors may interpret questions as challenges or resistance. Questions are often excellent indicators that an employee is attempting to create a bridge from the present to the future. If the question does not yet have an answer, invite the employee(s) to develop an approach or brief proposal for how they would work out this problem in the future. Alternately, identify

how you will address the problem and answer the question in the future.

- o DON'T *schedule “change workshops”* or send people to courses about change. This is often regarded as patronizing. The message to employees may be “You had better get with the program or else...” Learning about change (and transition) should be an ongoing part of all staff education programs. Most modern organizations are, to some degree, in a state of flux. All employees should know how to adapt to change and how to become effective agents of change.
- o DON'T expect the change process to go without a hitch. Unanticipated hills, curves and road blocks are part of every major journey. *Learn to be an agile problem-solver.* Invite everyone else to do likewise.



There's more to read:

Bridges, W. (1991). *Managing Transitions: Making the Most of Change*. New York, NY: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company.

James, J. (1997). *Thinking in the Future Tense: Leadership Skills for a New Age*. Touchstone Books.

Disciplinary Action

*“You always get more with honey,
than you do with a hammer.”*

Disciplinary action is a process used to assist employees to improve sub-standard job performance. Performance issues addressed by this process are more serious than those addressed using constructive critical feedback. Disciplinary action is used primarily when:

- ∪ an employee *makes a significant mistake*
- ∪ *an employee fails to respond* to one or more instances of constructive critical feedback given to correct his/her performance.

The information contained in this section should serve as a *general guideline* for disciplinary action. *Supervisors must consult and comply with:*

- ∪ their organization’s policy and procedures
- ∪ any requirements set out in collective agreements (in workplaces with unionized employees)
- ∪ employment standards or labour legislation in their area of the country.

The steps in disciplinary action are:

1. Giving a *verbal reprimand or verbal warning*. The process should include:

- ∪ *identifying a performance problem exists*; ensure the problem is either ongoing or serious enough to warrant this level of intervention
- ∪ *gathering factual information* regarding the performance issue or the incident that occurred
- ∪ *documenting* the information in writing; be specific with dates and times for ease of future reference
- ∪ *meeting privately* with the employee; identify the performance issue
- ∪ *describing* the nature of the incident and why the employee's behavior did not meet the required standard for acceptable performance
- ∪ *describing the corrective action* required; make your comments specific and instructive. Clarify the performance standards that must be met.
- ∪ *asking the employee for a commitment* to improve their future performance
- ∪ *identifying training or support* required from team members, the supervisor or management to maximize the likelihood of a positive outcome
- ∪ *documenting the disciplinary interview* in the employee's personnel file. Use professional, non-judgemental language; make it short and professional.
- ∪ verbal warnings are *not appropriate* when the employee's performance problem is very serious (e.g. health or safety of others has been jeopardized).

In more serious situations, a written warning is required.

- o in a small number of cases the employee is dismissed with “just cause” *without any prior warnings*. This action is warranted when an employee has breached their position of trust or has committed an illegal act.
 - o in many jurisdictions, all forms of written documentation (regardless of how informal or where the information is stored) are *considered to be legal documents*
 - \ information kept in a supervisor’s informal filing system, on a computer disk, or in an employee’s personnel file is still considered to be a legal document. This documentation may be required (at some point in the future) as part of formal proceedings (e.g. an employee grievance or wrongful dismissal lawsuit brought by the employee against his/her former employer).
 - \ it is important that information regarding all types of disciplinary action be professionally and accurately documented.
2. If the employee’s performance does not improve following a verbal reprimand, the supervisor may decide to issue a *second verbal reprimand* (if the situation being addressed is not too serious) or may decide to proceed to the second level of disciplinary action - written reprimand or written warning.

Preparing the written reprimand includes:

- o *writing a letter* (on the organization's letterhead), describing the performance problem or situation of concern
- o ensuring the letter indicates *what improvements are necessary* in the employee's performance; it should have a tone of urgency without being threatening
- o *avoiding* sentences such as: "This is your final warning..." or "Failure to correct your performance will result in dismissal..." These are threats that may imply you have already made up your mind to dismiss the employee. The disciplinary letter is, therefore, not a sincere attempt to correct performance.
- o *reviewing the letter with your manager* and/or personnel director to ensure compliance with organizational policies
- o *reviewing the letter with a lawyer* and/or with a representative of the government department responsible *for labour or employment standards in your area*. Paying for an hour of a lawyer's time may save your organization thousands of dollars down the road.
- o *it is unwise to "threaten" an employee* with dismissal at any stage (verbal or written) of the disciplinary process. This may cause an employee significant stress because they feel their livelihood, family security and career is at stake. An employee who is

“under duress”, may claim he/she was unable to correct his/her performance because of the “threats” made by the employer and the resulting distress. As a result, the employee *may* succeed in proving s/he was wrongfully dismissed.

3. The next step is conducting the disciplinary interview:
 - o *think* about (and rehearse if necessary) what you will say. Anticipate the employee’s questions and prepare your responses in advance.
 - o *meet privately* with the employee and present the letter. Clarify any points made in the letter. Be specific and confine your comments to behaviors or tasks requiring improvement. Ensure the employee realizes the gravity of the situation.
 - o *listen* to the employee’s comments and *do not argue*. Restate your concerns *one more time*. Ensure the employee understands why the action was necessary.
 - o *never* make comments about the employee’s *attitude*. A person’s attitude is always inferred from their behavior. If challenged about having a “bad attitude” the employee will (quite rightly) ask for concrete behavioral examples. The supervisor is then in a defensive position, and must talk about the employee’s performance and behavior.
 - o *close the interview by* summarizing your expectations for improved performance. If additional coaching or

training is necessary, discuss how, when and who will provide it.

- o *discuss how you will monitor* the employee's progress and schedule one or more follow-up feedback sessions
- o be prepared to answer questions from the employee on how to proceed with a grievance
- o during or after the meeting, you may decide to *take a few notes*. Retain these for future reference. Remember that these notes are a legal document.
- o some employees *react emotionally* to the disciplinary process. If the person is upset with the action, ensure s/he understands why the action was necessary and what s/he can do to "get back on track".
- o *if the person is angry* – do not argue. Explain once why the action was necessary. Restate the serious nature of the concerns. If the employee has avenues of appeal or grievance provided by organizational policy (or by the collective agreement) advise them of this and adjourn the meeting.
- o *if the employee refuses* to accept the letter containing the written reprimand, you may decide to read it to them
- o prepare for the possibility that at any time during the disciplinary process *the employee may decide to resign his/her position*. Plan in advance for how you will handle the situation. The best course of action

may be to accept the resignation and request it be made in writing before the employee leaves the disciplinary meeting.

- ↳ Alternatively, you may suggest that the employee take a few hours to consider their decision, then advise you if they actually wish to tender their resignation. This option is suitable when you wish to retain the employee and believe the performance issue can be successfully addressed.
 - ↳ in some situations it is *advisable to have a second person* (another supervisor or your manager) to attend the disciplinary meeting with you. There are several reasons this may be beneficial:
 - ↳ the person serves as a witness, verifying what was said and how you managed the meeting
 - ↳ the person may play a minute-taking role, documenting the conversation for future reference
 - ↳ the person may provide support to you and may debrief the meeting with you afterward
 - ↳ if the person is a manager, s/he provides the action with a sense of authority that comes with his/her position.
4. In a few situations, an employee may receive a second written reprimand. This may occur when:
- ↳ the first written reprimand was given several (3 - 6 months) previously

- o the employee's performance improved significantly between the first incident and the new incident
 - o the current situation is not connected in any way to the previous performance problem
5. Employees who improve their performance after disciplinary action must be commended. Ensure you support the employee to sustain his/her progress. Continue to challenge the person to go beyond current performance by setting goals to develop excellence.
6. Never mix the performance appraisal process with disciplinary action
- o if disciplinary action is necessary and the performance appraisal is a few days away, delay the appraisal interview and deal with the performance issue first
 - o appraisals must follow the rule of "no surprises" (see the section of Performance Appraisal). Adding disciplinary action to the appraisal violates this rule. In addition, many employees are anxious about their annual appraisal. Combining disciplinary action with performance appraisals, gives all employees (not just the person with a performance problem) the impression that there is a reason to be fearful.
 - o if a performance issue, for which an employee has been previously disciplined, has been successfully corrected, there is no need to mention the issue again during a performance appraisal. What's done

is done; dealing with the same issue again is overkill and creates a negative tone for the performance appraisal interview.



There's more to read:

Falcone, P. (1998). *101 Sample Write-Ups for Documenting Employee Performance Problems: A Guide to Progressive Discipline and Termination*. New York, NY: AMACOM.

Grote, D. (1995). *Disciplining Without Punishment: The Proven Strategy That Turns Problem Employees into Superior Performers*. New York, NY: AMACOM.

Paterson, L.T. & Deblieux, M.R. (1993). *Supervisor's Guide to Documenting Employee Discipline*. Lexington Law Publications.

