

DISCIPLINE

Safety professionals generally do not want to be known as “safety cops.” They prefer to engage employees in the process of creating a safe work environment rather than police the workforce looking for violators.

Still, safety rules need to be followed, especially when non-compliance endangers other workers. How should safety leaders and supervisors deal with workers who break those rules? One controversial answer is discipline.

The word “discipline” tends to conjure up negative feelings associated with punishment. However, experts say defining discipline solely in negative terms obscures the opportunity for leaders to correct and motivate workers to change behavior.

“Discipline is not punishment,” said E. Scott Geller, senior partner of Safety Performance Solutions and professor of psychology at Virginia Tech in Blacksburg, VA. “Discipline is influencing people to do the right thing, and punishment is not the best way.”

Although the word "discipline" often is equated with punishment, it actually includes reminders, counseling and other efforts to ensure workers follow procedure.

Disciplinary policies should account for gray areas, such as differences in the severity of the violation.

Employers should keep separate records for safety-related discipline so they can easily produce them in the event of an OSHA inspection.

Having a written disciplinary policy helps to ensure consistent enforcement of the safety rules.

Rules should apply to everyone in the organization: top-down and bottom-up.

Fair and firm application of safe work practices is an important step on the road toward safety excellence.

Produced by the Institute of Scrap Recycling Industries
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November 27, 2012