

Positive Psychology and Workplace Discipline

written by Rory Lodge | November 6, 2013



Try these 3 strategies that focus on positive performance improvement

Positive thoughts and emotions increase our ability to be resilient and to learn. In a popular TED presentation titled, '[Shawn Achor: The happy secret to better work](#)', psychologist Shawn Achor shares the story of how a positive focus leads to more success; a brain 'on positive' mode performs better than a brain 'on negative' mode.

Any number of situations provide opportunity for employees not to perform up to standards. When an employee does not perform up to standards, it triggers reactions in both employer and employee. The impact of one poor performance resonates throughout an organization.

Progressive discipline is a common employer response to workplace performance problems. Unfortunately, the word discipline itself has a negative connotation and by referencing the term an employer may be creating a negativity bias that can infect the entire process. Instead of focusing on the 'negative' during the process of addressing change there are times when the positive can be a more effective strategy to enable change.

Positive Discipline?

Positive discipline is not an oxymoron. By referencing 'Positive Intervention', or 'Performance Improvement Intervention' you focus on improvement. Imagine having a workplace performance discussion with your employee. To begin the discussion, instead of using the phrase, "we are implementing discipline", use the phrase, "we are providing intervention to improve your performance". The subtle change in phrasing may reduce a defensive response.

3 Components of Positive Performance Intervention

1) **Focus on strengths and reduce opportunities for weaknesses:** When an employee has been informed about a performance problem, he or she might feel fear, surprise, disbelief, anxiety or even anger. None of these emotions are conducive to positive change. These emotions can be used for motivation. In order to focus on intervention and strength enhancement, consider shifting short-term work tasks elsewhere so that your employee focuses on work tasks that he or she is good at. With a strength based focus, your employee is more likely to have a positive mindset, and therefore, will be more receptive to change.

2) **Create opportunities for praise:** Setting an employee up to succeed may enable this employee to achieve further success. During the first few days or weeks of 'discipline', create achievable goals and milestones. Minimize opportunities for failure. Upon achieving the goal, your employee will receive praise and build stronger and more trusting relationships with supervisors or HR.

Does this sound like rewarding bad behaviour? Not at all. By removing opportunities for failure in the short term, you increase your ability to reward positive behaviour. You reinforce the behaviours you want to reward.

3) **Generosity can be it's own reward:** Creating opportunities for an employee to 'give back' can be an excellent way to increase your employee's positive investment in the organization. You have to think this one through to find the right type of opportunity. Assign your employee the task of working on a community or charity related project, taking part in an event planning committee, or deciding about a new logo design. To decide upon assigned tasks, you must understand the nature of the person's discipline problem. If the person has a personal behaviour based problem, ask them to volunteer at charitable event where they will work directly with the public.

Positive intervention must still include well laid out performance improvement expectations, with goals, measurement details and timelines. Positive psychology may help employee improvement come quicker and stick.