

## The Effectiveness and Consistency of Disciplinary Actions and Procedures within a South African Organisation

Xavier Knight

Wilfred I. Ukpere

Department of Industrial Psychology and People Management, Faculty of Management,  
University of Johannesburg, Johannesburg, South Africa  
E-mail: wikipere@uj.ac.za

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### Abstract

*Disciplinary procedures are used to correct behaviour which contradicts organisational goals and brings about labour peace in the workplace. However, if incorrectly applied, its consequences can be felt throughout the organisation. The objective of this paper was to examine how employees perceive the application of disciplinary action in the organisation and whether they felt that leaders were following correct procedures in this regard. A closed-ended questionnaire was distributed to a sample group of employees, where after focus group interviews were held to elaborate on answers given. The results revealed that employees felt disciplinary procedures were inconsistently applied, and that not all employees received the same treatment for similar actions. It is suggested that leaders within the investigated organisation receive guidance and appropriate training to correct this perception, which will lead to the consistent application of discipline and appropriate treatment of all employees, resulting in improved employee morale, motivation and a healthier work environment.*

**Keywords:** Effectiveness, consistency, disciplinary action, procedures.

### 1. Introduction and Background

Organisations, in any context, are made up of groups of people and individuals who are interdependent, and work together to achieve organisational goals and objectives. Therefore, these people interact with one another on a daily basis to fulfil their job-roles and to contribute effectively to their organisations. However, individuals enter the workplace with their own unique abilities, attitudes, values and perceptions, and this in itself can be a source of conflict in any organization (Robbins, Odendaal & Roodt, 2003). To resolve conflict between individuals and groups, and to ensure a harmonious work environment, managers, supervisors and other leaders utilize disciplinary action to prevent escalation and to maintain industrial peace. Disciplinary action, in its essence, is designed to correct behaviour and to maintain balance in the employment relationship (Grogan, 2009). When undesirable behaviour or actions are noticed in the workplace, it is thus the prerogative of leaders and managers to correct this behaviour and establish more acceptable norms or standards than those being corrected (Rao, 2009). Therefore, discipline and its subsequent rules and procedures form an integral part of the employment relationship between employer and employee. But, in order for discipline to be effective and yield its desired results, it needs to be substantially and procedurally fair (Bendix, 2005). This means that proper rules and processes needs to be followed in the workplace to ensure that all organisational policies and legislative requirements are being adhered to. Substantial fairness relates to the reason for embarking on the disciplinary action, the cause for action. There has to be a just and equitable reason for embarking on the disciplinary action, and this needs to comply with the organisation's policies as well as those promulgated in the labour legislation of the country (Venter & Levy, 2011). Procedural fairness relates to the correct process that needs to be followed during the disciplinary inquiry (Bendix, 2010). This refers to the organisation's internal rules and processes that need to be followed step by step to ensure that employee rights are not being violated, and to protect the business against claims of unfair labour practices and unfair dismissals. Ensuring that both aspects of fairness are adhered to is a difficult task for every manager or supervisor in a business. As these aspects have to be adhered to, supervisors and managers alike need to ensure that correct policies and procedures are followed in this respect. Leaders thus have an inherent responsibility towards the business in ensuring that their actions are appropriate within the context of disciplinary action, and that they at all times act in the best interest of the organisation. This view is substantiated by Cole (2007:110) who stated that

“fairness is the key to positive reactions to discipline on the part of employees”.

The case organisation for this paper specializes in Powerlines. The authors have decided not to disclose the name of the organisation for ethical reasons. The organisation is an engineering firm located on the East Rand of Johannesburg, which manufactures powerline towers, cables and components for organisations such as Eskom, Genrec, Imab, CSIR and other companies around Africa as well as internationally. This international reach has created plenty of opportunities for the business, and they have been able to secure long term contracts worth millions of Rands for the business. This has taken place within the context of the electrical supply industry, where South Africa has also been facing many difficulties and challenges over recent years. The organisation has a total number of 879 full time and part-time employees who form the organisational structure of the business. These employees are divided into different departments according to the tasks that they perform within the business, although the manufacturing plant of the business forms the centre and heart of all operations which take place in the organisation. The organisation is a successful and profitable business, but employee relations within the firm has not always been well handled and controlled by senior management and leaders within the organisation. This is as a result of a history of employee perceptions towards the organisation's disciplinary policies and procedures within the workplace. These perceptions do not display a very favourable image of the business, as accusations of unfair treatment of employees, inconsistent application of disciplinary action and “favouratism” in the workplace are creating an unhealthy work environment within the business. This perception has been held for a number of years by differing employees at all levels of the business, and it seems that leaders within the business do not share the same sentiment as employees. These perceptions held by employees, form the underlying reason to conduct this research, as these perceptions need to be investigated on a deeper level, and the root causes of all these problems need to be identified and addressed. This can also help management in the business to become aware of these problems, and hopefully mechanisms and interventions can be put in place to improve any weaknesses or deficiencies in the current disciplinary policies and procedures as an overall system.

### *1.1 Problem statement, research questions and objectives*

Disciplinary action plays a major role in determining the future behaviours of employees, and it can be for the better or worse within this context. In order to be effective, the action has to be applied fairly and consistently, with proper procedures and policies being utilised. The problem is that disciplinary action within case organisation is not perceived to be fair, and this perception may be a barrier to the purpose of disciplinary action, which is actually meant to correct behaviour.

### *1.2 Research Questions*

The above statements have led to the formulation of the following research questions:

- What are the perceived problems that employees have regarding the company's disciplinary procedure?
- Are disciplinary procedures strictly followed and applied by leaders in the organisation?

### *1.3 Research objectives*

The main objectives of the research are:

- To evaluate employee perceptions about the disciplinary procedures at the case organisation.
- To analyse the effectiveness of disciplinary action in the business.
- To analyse weaknesses in the current application of disciplinary action and to recommend appropriate improvements.

## **2. Literature Review**

Disciplinary action is an emotive word within the context of organisations, as well as within the employment relationship. There is a certain level of trust and respect within the employment relationship, and once this is eroded, it may be difficult or even impossible to recover at a later stage. As a result of this, there is little doubt that discipline at work has been one of the most challenging aspects that a manager has to deal with. Gennard and Judge (2005:272) state that “It brings to the forefront matters relating to an individual's performance, capability and conduct, and in the context of employment,

the most appropriate definition of disciplinary action is to improve, or attempt to improve the behaviour, orderliness, or actions of employees at work". The importance of this is further emphasized by the following statement "it is important for managers, at all levels, to appreciate that the effectiveness of the business can be undermined if issues relating to conduct, capability and performance are not handled professionally and consistently, or, even worse, if such matters are ignored altogether" (Gennard & Judge, 2005:273). It is thus important that the principle of good practice be applied whenever disciplinary action is instituted on any employee or member of an organisation. Good practice, though, is a term that many managers find difficulty with as it is a concept that is, at times difficult to define. " In the context of discipline at work, it is about acting with just cause, using procedures correctly, acting consistently, following the rules of natural justice and many more aspects" (Gennard & Judge, 2005:273). The aspects of fairness and consistency are at the centre of good practice, and the goal of every manager, supervisor or leader should be to treat disciplinary matters in a fair and equitable manner, as fair as possible. The major underlying aspect of all this is the disciplinary procedure which is followed by an organisation.

### *2.1 The Use of discipline*

Disciplinary action and procedures are used as a corrective measure in organisations, not to punish the employee, but rather to correct behaviour or a current work standard to more appropriate levels (Bendix, 2010). It is thus important to give some form of correction following an unwanted response, in an attempt to help eliminate that behaviour or action. If discipline is used as an act of punishment, its results may not be that which is required and may lead to more problems in dealing with that specific individual or employee. This statement is substantiated by the following "The results of punishment are relatively short-lived, and hence punishment only has a temporary effect on deterring unwanted behaviour rather than eliminating it totally. It has also been found that punishment has a more permanent effect if the desirable behaviours are rewarded at the same time as punishing the undesirable behaviours" (Daniels, 2006:250). If this is applied in a work setting, for example, it would suggest that regularly punishing an employee who turns up late for work on a continuous basis would be more effective if the individual was also rewarded at the same time if he/she turns up for work on time. There may be a number of reasons why disciplinary action fails when it is used as a punishment mechanism in the organisation. One reason could be that the action hurts the individual. In this context, it is not a physical pain, but rather more of an emotional/mental pain felt as a result of the employee feeling a bit humiliated of being disciplined. Punishment also has the potential of creating anger and hostility in the work environment (Robbin, et al., 2003). If this aspect is not addressed in the work environment, the working relationships in the business can become very harmful and damaged over a long period of time. Another issue which is also problematic is that punishment brings with it the effect of getting attention in the workplace. Other employees in the workplace may become aware that one of their colleagues are being disciplined, and this attention is often not the type that employees want to become associated with. When an employee views the disciplinary action in this manner, it often will not be successful. "Using discipline in the organisation is a process of both control and power" (Daniels, 2006:251). This suggests that managers within the organisation should take care when affecting disciplinary action on an employee, as the action often carries many consequences with it. The control aspect can be said to relate to the policies and procedures which management have to operate in to ensure that the disciplinary action yields the correct results for all the parties involved.

### *2.2 Disciplinary codes*

Disciplinary code is another important aspect of disciplinary procedure in an organisation. "Because of the desirability of consistency in disciplinary penalties, and because employees need to have some expectations of the consequences of breaking rules, an organization should have a code which sets out possible offences, and the disciplinary action which may result" (Finnemore, 2006:220). This is to ensure that employees are aware of which actions are desirable in the organisation and which are not, so they can adjust their behaviour to acceptable standards of conduct in the workplace. This knowledge on the part of employees is essential, as " Such codes form an important base from which the legitimacy of an organisation's discipline arises, and are a source of important documentary evidence in most arbitration hearings concerning unfair dismissal" (Finnemore, 2006:220). It is also important that these disciplinary codes (procedures) be in writing as part of the organisation's formal business documents, and that they be filed accordingly. Employees within the organisation, throughout every level and division, should be aware of this, and also have access to these policy documents as part of the reading material within the business. It is common practice for organisations in the workplace to display a copy of the disciplinary codes and policies on notice boards in each department, where employees can browse

through these at a time convenient for them during their normal working hours (Rao, 2009). Trade unions should also be consulted by management when disciplinary codes are established and formalised within the business. "Where a trade union is recognized, it should ensure that the agreed rules are seen to be fair and equitable, otherwise the code will have no legitimacy. When incorporated into an agreement, such rules and procedures are formally accepted by the parties and are incorporated into the conditions of service of employees" (Finnemore, 2006:222). The initial period after the codes have been accepted are generally used to ensure that employees, new and old, are aware of these policies and familiarise themselves with these provisions. A large majority of disciplinary policies and codes usually recognise a list of offences. "These are usually divided into minor/moderate offences like lateness, unexcused absence or leaving the workplace without permission. More serious offences are theft, bribery and fraud, malicious damage to property, assault, possession of alcohol or drugs and refusal to obey legitimate instructions" (Finnemore, 2006:222). When a minor offence is committed for the first time, counseling or an oral reprimand may be given to an employee. If this behaviour occurs again, a written warning may be issued. Where this behaviour carries forward on a continuous basis, a final written warning is given, followed by a dismissal. In more serious offences, there may be a requirement for a first penalty of an instant final written warning. Finnemore (2006:222) advocates "Summary dismissal in cases such as gross negligence, dishonesty, assault and gross insubordination".

### 2.3 *Disciplinary procedure*

An organisation's disciplinary procedure outlines the principles, policies and actions which should be followed in certain situations, and it is important that this be in writing and readily accessible and available to all employees. Gennard and Judge (2005:273) advocate that "it has been the case for a number of years that a disciplinary procedure should be set out as follows: an oral warning, followed by a written warning if the required improvement is not forthcoming, followed by a final written warning if conduct or performance is still unsatisfactory, and finally, dismissal". This system is designed to discourage incorrect behaviour and to speedily rectify problems when they are uncovered. As a result of this, the first-line superior will usually be the first individual to be involved in disciplinary matters. Holley, Jennings and Walters (2008:525) note that, "The first-line supervisor usually conducts the initial investigation of the facts surrounding the employee's discipline. Furthermore, it is usually the first-line supervisor who recommends disciplinary action or has the authority to take disciplinary action against an employee". For the fact that specific rights of employees have to be protected, management may decide to have a review of a supervisor's decision to discipline an employee and may require higher-level authorization before the disciplinary action is taken. This is in line with the principle of "good faith", and thus protects the organisation and its interests. "Therefore, it is possible to introduce some level of restriction on supervisors to protect employee rights without adversely affecting supervisor's belief in the effectiveness of the disciplinary system" (Holley et al., 2008:525). This measure ensures that the organisation is not open to attacks from employees concerning rights violations, while also protecting the supervisor's faith within the company's internal control processes and policies.

### 2.4 *Effectiveness of disciplinary action and procedures*

The effectiveness of disciplinary action depends to a large extent, on the reasons and circumstances for its implementation. Lewis, Thornhill and Saunders (2003:283) note that discipline is necessary where it is an "action instigated by management against an employee who fails to meet reasonable and legitimate expectations in terms of performance, conduct and adherence to rules". It can thus be said that an employer is justified in instituting this action as a measure to protect its interests and ensure that an employee carries out the duties expected of him/her in terms of the contract of employment. However, certain rules and processes also have to be followed by both employer and employee to ensure that the action actually yields the desired results for both parties. "It is clear that the disciplinary procedure is there to protect the employee from unfair and unreasonable treatment, as well as to afford the employer the opportunity of dispensing with the unsatisfactory employee" (Lewis et al., 2003:301). Long gone are the days where employers could simply dismiss an employee for any reason, proper rules and processes have to be followed in modernized times. Another aspect which influences the effectiveness of disciplinary action and procedures is the consistency with which these measures are undertaken. This aspect will now be explored in more detail in relation to the discourse.

### 2.5 *Consistency of disciplinary action and procedures*

Consistency can be defined as the reliability or logical adherence of successive events or results. Within the context of

disciplinary action, consistency refers to the same set of rules being applied to all employees within the organisation, regardless of age, gender, position, seniority or any other criteria similar to this. It is thus important that employers apply the same rules to all employees at all times. Unfortunately, this is not always the case within the workplace, as some employees get off "lighter" than others for committing the same misconduct or breach of rule. "An employer is guilty of an unfair labour practice if he acts unfairly when suspending an employee or imposing a disciplinary sanction short of dismissal (Du Plessis & Fouche, 2006:307). Employers thus have to ensure that they act in a correct manner when dealing with disciplinary cases, and their behaviour should be applied to all in a reliable manner. If this is not forthcoming, it could harm the trust relationship which has been built between the employer and employees. "Trust is relevant in situations where the trustor is dependent on the trustee's action(s) in the future to achieve his/her own goals and objectives" (Six, 2005:14). Trust is seen as an integral part of the employment relationship as "this dependence implies that the trustor, when acting on his/her trust, makes him-/herself vulnerable to the actions of the trustee" (Six, 2005:114). The actions and decisions of the leadership responsible for effecting disciplinary action should thus ensure that the application is fair, reliable and transparent. If these are not present, not only will the trust relationship between employer and employee be breached, but there may also be major implications on the organisation, and the effective functioning of its operations.

### *2.6 The implications of inconsistent and unfair disciplinary action on the organisation*

Organisations often pay a hefty price as a result of poor disciplinary application and procedures. This refers not only to monetary expenses, but also to the loss of morale, intellectual property and motivation on the part of employees. "Workers typically respond to the oppressive situation in the only way open to them as individuals: by withdrawal from the source of the discontent, or, in the case of certain forms of sabotage or indiscipline, by reacting against the immediate manifestation of oppression" (Blyton & Turnbull, 1998:311). As a result, employers may lose valuable employees because of supervisor or manager bias, and not even be aware of this. Supervisors may apply a certain rule to an individual that he/she primarily dislikes, and apply the same rule completely different to an individual in his/her social circle or if an inherent friendship is present. At times, leaders may make a genuine mistake in applying a certain rule. Imel, (2011:97) notes that "we are all human and at one time or another, all humans make mistakes. How significant these mistakes are and how often they occur are a direct result of each individual's own self-discipline. Sometimes the mistake made involves violating a rule, policy, procedure or standard of conduct in the workplace". Then there are other occasions where these leaders blatantly abuse their power, and seek to punish individuals they dislike and attempt to push them out of the organisation. When these individuals lodge an unfair dismissal claim against the organisation, the costs incurred by the organisation can be huge. These range from damages payments imposed on employers, fines and penalties handed, as well as damage to the organisation's image and reputation. Therefore, the assumption can be made that organisations need to ensure that the application of their disciplinary actions and procedures are consistent and effective, or face the possibility of many difficulties in attempting to move the organisation forward.

## **3. Research Methodology**

The purpose of the research was to examine the perceptions of employees regarding the case organisation's disciplinary processes, and the effectiveness and subsequent weaknesses of their system. For this purpose, primary sources of information were used in the form of questionnaires and focus group interviews. The targeted population involved a sample group of 70 staff members, which included 50 blue collar workers, 10 white collar workers and 10 managerial employees. The purpose of this was to interview a broad selection of employees, from employees working in offices to ground level employees on the shop-floor, in order to gather information from employees of all levels and occupations. This diverse population would provide a rich source of data from every viewpoint of the organisation. A questionnaire was distributed to participants, followed by interviews according to their categorisation, where they could elaborate on answers given in the questionnaire. The questionnaire was compiled in a user friendly manner, with participants easily being able to answer the closed ended (yes/no) questions, which was simple and consisting of only a few short questions. This would provide both written information on the questionnaire, as well as interviews where body language and voice tone could be observed in reaction to questions asked. This would provide valuable information, which would not have been gathered by any other method, which would go a long way in describing how employees really feel about the case organisation's disciplinary procedures and the application of these in relation to each employee within the organisation. Each reference to blue collar workers would be those employees doing manual work in the plant factory of

the business, white collar to employees who in junior- middle management in the business, and managerial to top management and executive employees.

#### 4. Data Analysis\Critical Analysis and Discussion of Findings

In measuring the effectiveness and consistency of disciplinary action at the case organisation, questions were posed and statements made to ascertain whether the action was effective and consistent, and to identify any weaknesses in the system. "Measurement is ultimately a comparison: a thing or concept measured against a point of limitation" (Leedy & Ormrod, 2010:25). The responses to the closed ended questions and subsequent interviews were as follows:

**Table 1:** Employees Perceptions of the Application of Discipline within the organisation

Question	Category of employee	Yes	%	No	%
Do leaders treat all employees in the same manner?	Blue-collar	5	10	45	90
	White-collar	8	80	2	20
	Management	9	90	1	10
Do leaders apply the same rules to all employees?	Blue-collar	1	2	49	98
	White-collar	6	60	4	40
	Management	8	80	2	20
Does the organisation's disciplinary procedures lead to a healthy working environment?	Blue-collar	7	14	43	86
	White-collar	8	80	2	20
	Management	7	70	3	30
Are disciplinary policies and procedures visible within the organisation?	Blue-collar	9	18	41	82
	White-collar	9	90	1	10
	Management	10	100	0	0

##### 4.1 Do leaders treat all employees in the same manner?

The rationale for this data was to measure if leaders apply the same treatment to all workers. The reason for this was to determine if there are other social factors which play a role in how leaders treat their employees. According to Table 1, 90% of blue-collar workers felt that leaders do not treat all employees in the same manner, while 20% Of white-collar employees felt the same way, and only 10% of management agreed as well. Reasons elaborated upon during the interviews were that leaders had "favourites" among employees in the organisation. This, according to the target population, was as a result of certain employees giving leaders information about other employees work activities and behaviours on the shop floor, as well as other private information about employees activities outside the workplace.

##### 4.2 Do leaders apply the same rules to all employees?

The rationale for this data was to determine whether all employees within the organisation faced the same action for misconduct and other related offences. According to Table 1, from the 50 blue-collar employees surveyed, 98% stated no, 40% of white-collar workers, and 10% of managers felt that not all employees faced the same consequences for their actions. Reasons given during the focus group interviews were that managers do not subject employees that they "like" to the same sanctions as employees they "dislike". A "disliked" employee would be disciplined for slow production on the job, while a "liked" employee would not. The social relationships between the leaders and workers played a huge role in the actions, and this demotivates a large portion of the workforce, where they know that if they are not a "favourite" among leaders, they would be punished for an error or act which deviates from the normal practices in the workplace, regardless of the reasons therefore.

##### 4.3 Does the organisation's disciplinary procedures lead to a healthy working environment?

The rationale for this data was to determine what effect the disciplinary procedures had on employees in the workplace. According to Table 1, 86% of blue-collar workers felt that the company's procedures led to an unhealthy working environment, 20% of white-collar workers agreed, and 30% of management felt the same way. During the interviews,

employees mentioned that the leaders' inconsistent application of disciplinary measures in the workplace led to the following outcomes:

- Low employee morale and motivation.
- Decreased productivity as a result of unfairness.
- Hostility between employees, and employees and leaders, where employees receive different treatment in terms of the application of company disciplinary measures.

#### *4.4 Are disciplinary policies and procedures visible and accessible within the organisation?*

The rationale for this data was to determine whether employees were aware of the organisation's disciplinary policies and procedures, and if they has access to it. According to Table 1, 82% of blue-collar workers replied no, 10% of white-collar workers replied no, and 100% of managerial employees said yes. This was as a result of policies being visible within offices in the organisation, and these employees could easily access the information on the organisation's intranet from their computers. Policies and procedures were only pasted on notice boards in some departments within the plant, while other departments did not even have a notice board to display anything on.

### **5. Recommendations**

From the survey and interviews conducted, it is clear that employees at the case organisation perceive that the organisation's disciplinary procedures are inconsistent and ineffective. As reviewed in the literature, it has been shown that this can have detrimental effects on the functioning of an organisation and its employees. The following interventions can be implemented to ensure that leaders within the organisation apply discipline and its subsequent procedures in the correct manner:

#### *5.1 Mentoring and Coaching*

These two approaches can be utilised to guide and direct leaders to use proper procedures and processes within the business. With mentoring, a senior executive or manager could mentor middle managers, transferring knowledge of system dynamics and forming a firm grounding in business knowledge and disciplinary competencies. With coaching, middle managers can direct and lead supervisors, where one on one developmental discussions can be aimed at the specific issues of discipline and how to institute it appropriately according to company policies and legislation.

#### *5.2 Ethics Training*

This will aim to instil in managers, supervisors and employees alike a sense of corporate values, regulations and rules. This will increase awareness of disciplinary issues, expand the scope of personal awareness, and spark imagination on the consequences of non-compliance to organisational policies and procedures. Leaders will then be able to assess how they have been treating employees in the workplace, and hopefully make a change for the better within the business.

#### *5.3 Display Company's disciplinary policies and procedures visibly throughout the business*

The organisation should ensure that all employees in every department of the business has access to and is aware of the company's rules and procedures regarding disciplinary action. In departments where there are notice boards, copies of these documents should be displayed in an area where employees can view them easily and in a convenient manner. Notice boards should also be established in those departments where there are none, and copies of the documents also displayed for employees to view. This will ensure that employees are made aware of what offences constitute disciplinary action and the sanctions that will be attached to certain actions in the business.

### **6. Conclusion**

Discipline is a difficult aspect to deal with within organisations, especially because of the human element that is involved in its application and the subsequent procedures and outcomes. When applied appropriately, it is a powerful tool to bring about change in employee behaviour, where organisational goals can be realigned to individual goals for the benefit of

both. As much as this is true, the exact opposite can also cause substantial harm to a business. Leaders who do not apply discipline consistently, do not follow organisational procedures, and use disciplinary action for their own vengeful purposes, bring about an unhealthy work environment where employees are dissatisfied and demotivated in their jobs. This is visible within the case organisation, where a large majority of employees surveyed feel that some employees are treated more harshly than others, while some employees enjoy preferential treatment regarding discipline within the business, as a result of leader's stereotypes, bias and agendas. It was also not surprising to find that leaders themselves felt exactly the opposite way: that they actually follow disciplinary procedures to the last detail and treat all employees in the same manner. The viewpoint that carries more merit are those of ground level employees in the workplace, as leaders biases and prejudices act as barriers to them actually seeing the impact of their actions and behaviours on the work environment. Interventions and training is needed in the business so that leaders can apply discipline fairly and consistently, overcome their biases and errors, and employees to see the transparency and legitimacy of disciplinary action. This can lead to improved employee morale and a healthier work environment for all within the organisation.

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