

# Magical Employee Discipline

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There is a great tendency among managers to think that discipline is about punishing misbehaviour - in a way which discourages repetition, and at the same time acts as an example to others. Wrong. *Effective* discipline is not about punishment – it's about getting people to do the right thing. And that's quite different, because it changes your tactics completely.

A few years ago I was revisiting a company which we had helped win the *Best Factory in Britain* title, on the occasion of their end-of-year awards party. We heard about some remarkable achievements, and there were congratulations all round. Finally we came to the 'Employee of the Year' award. To my great surprise, it was awarded not to an employee, but to a front-line manager. And it wasn't a fix, he was the overwhelming choice of the employees themselves.

## Maintaining Discipline by 'Kicking Ass'

"What's brought that about?" I asked him quietly later. "A few years ago, I wouldn't have won anything like that," he confided. "You see, I grew up in a company where I saw managers going around 'kicking ass'. I thought that's what you had to do. So when I was first promoted, I did exactly the same, I 'kicked ass' just like them. But since I've joined this company I've changed completely, I've realised you're never going to get the best out of your people if that's all you do."

"What do you mean?" I asked. "Well, when you manage by 'kicking ass', people only do as much as they have to, to keep you off their back. They don't take initiatives to help you, on the contrary they quite like it when they see you getting into trouble. If problems occur, they wait for you to sort it out, they think it's your job. If you're not there, they see it as an opportunity to slack off. If you want to keep productivity up, you've got to be there all the time. Come to think of it, I don't know why I ever thought it was a good way of managing."

"So, what do you do now?" I asked. "First, I don't just rely on fear, threats, and punishment discipline to keep people in line. What I do is, I treat my people like adults, but I expect them to *behave* like adults." "But what does that mean in practice, George?" I continued.

"I expect them to do the job the best way they know how all day every day, whether I'm there or not. Anyone who wants to indulge in childish behaviour like stealing

extra minutes at every tea break and lunch break, lining up at the clock well before finishing time, always waiting to be told what to do when they can see themselves what needs to be done, had better think about finding a job somewhere else, because it's not going to be here. I make an assumption that they all want to do a good job every day, and they know that's what I expect of them.

“On the other hand, they know what they can expect of me. I make it my prime task to get them everything they need to do a good job - the right equipment, the right materials, the right information, the right working environment, the right training - that's my job, and they know it. And I bust a gut to get them everything they need, knowing that they'll do a good job for me in return.”

“So, it's not just because you have become Mr Nice Guy that you've won this award, then,” I ventured. “No,” George came back, “I think I'm quite demanding actually. Going soft is not the answer, people have to know what's OK, and what's not OK, and I think they respond to that. But we talk to each other as adult to adult, not as boss to minions, we talk and act as if we're all playing on the same team. They know they can rely on me, and I rely on them. I think maybe the reason they all voted for me is that's not what they normally expect managers to be like, and they like the respect it gives them. Anyway, that's what I'm going to keep doing, because it really works.”

## **The Importance of the OK BOX**

This manager has alighted here on something fundamentally important if you are going to get from your staff the kind of behaviour you most want to see. It's what I call the OK BOX. Making clear to staff what is OK, and what is NOT OK, and being consistent about it. The vast majority of people actually prefer to do a good job, but you have to spell out what that good job is, in practical terms, so that everyone will know – without having to ask you – when they are doing a good job.

Once you have done that, you can safely leave your staff to simply get on with the job. And they will. But there's one important condition. You must show you assume that's just what they'll do whether you are there are not. And that expectation must be genuine on your part; in other words, you treat them like adults, and assume they will act like adults.

This point was well illustrated when we were working with an American computer memory company several years ago. Every department seemed to be plagued with late delivery problems, with delayed material supplies, hold-ups between departments, scrambling to get orders out on time every month, etc. With one exception. Finance department always delivered their reports on time, and it seemed so quiet in there.

While working with the managers of another department, we decided to invite Brian, the Finance Director, in to tell us how he did it. After some initial embarrassment, he said : “Let’s take a simple example. If I need some figures totalling, I make sure my member of staff understands exactly what needs to be done, then I make sure she has all the equipment she needs to do the job. I watch her start off to make sure everything is OK, then I leave her to get on with it. I tell her that if she has any problems to come and see me straight away, but if I don’t hear from her, I will assume everything is going according to plan.”

“But what if she doesn’t do that?” one of the managers asked. Brian looked horrified. “Doesn’t do that?” he replied, “ Doesn’t do that? Why wouldn’t she?” It was clear the idea had never entered his head. Brian’s department worked like clockwork, because he communicated this strong expectation to his people that if he gave them a personal responsibility, they would do the job like responsible adults. And they did. There was never any question in his mind about it.

## **The Source of Good Discipline**

And that’s where good discipline starts - in the mind of the manager. In fact, the expectations in the mind of the manager have more to do with good employee behaviour than any other factor. What you expect, what you are willing to accept, is what you will get. Brian had clear expectations of his people, and every month that’s what they delivered without him ever having to raise his voice. That effective kind of discipline is positive, not negative. And it works better.

Going around ‘kicking ass’ may be seductive – it feeds your ego to see people’s fearful reactions to your authority, and the quick changes you can make. You may even convince yourself the place would fall apart if you were not there. And of course it would, because everybody’s waiting for you to make all the decisions, to solve all their problems.

And that style of managing takes up so much time. You have to be there all the time, all day every day. You rush from one issue to another, the problems never stop coming. That’s because no-one wants to take any responsibility, they’re leaving it all to you. It’s a 100 Years’ War. Then, when you are away for any length of time, you find yourself phoning in at regular intervals to ‘make sure’ of this, and to ‘make sure’ of that. But that’s not managing, that’s failure to manage.

The answer is to change from external discipline to self-discipline. Take the trouble to spell out the requirements of the job to every job-holder, in detail. Then make every effort to see they have all the equipment, materials, information and training they need to do the job well. At that point, tell them you expect them to get on with

the job without supervision. You won't be dragooning them into it. They have to take responsibility for the whole job, for their quality and productivity, for making sure their customers, both inside and outside the business, get a zero-defect job.

At first staff may appear apprehensive about that, but think about it this way. Because they are doing the job all day, most staff know more about the details of their job than the manager does anyway. Also, how much time can any manager *super-vise* every member of staff during a day - that is, look over their shoulder to make sure they are doing the job right? Managers we ask usually plump for 10% of the time at most, but more likely 5% or less. So if staff are already doing the job by themselves for 90% of the time or more, just let them do that good job for 100% of the time. It's simple.

But taking that step releases a lot of valuable management time. That is time managers should use to make improvements, especially those which will help make the job easier for their people, or help them to do a high-quality job more consistently. When employees see that their boss is spending most of his time now working on things that will help them, or make the job easier for them, they are much more likely to want to do a good job for him in return. That was one of the key reasons why George, in the story above, was voted 'employee of the year' by his own people.

## **Describing What A Good Job Looks Like**

Good discipline is first about making the OK Box clear, and then encouraging people to get in there, and stay there. That means you need to spend time showing what's right and praising what's right rather than spend endless time correcting and criticising what's wrong.

On our first visits to a new client, managers were unanimous in their opinion that their biggest problem was "lack of discipline". Digging deeper, we discovered this meant employees making late starts and early finishes, producing jobs of variable quality, failure to keep their workplaces clean and tidy, wandering off from the job, etc. etc. Worse than that, the managers confessed they had no idea how to correct things, as whatever they tried did not seem to work.

We told them we would start by defining with them what a good employee looked like, describing the behaviour they would most like to see. We might then consider conducting six-monthly appraisals with each employee, and rewarding them for their good behaviour rather than punish their bad behaviour. We explained that what we came up with would have to be simple, understandable, and readily achievable by any employee. This is the list the front-line managers finally agreed upon.

- 1 Work output meets target
- 2 Quality level meets 'best' standard
- 3 Performs a variety of jobs to the required standard
- 4 Helps to train colleagues as required
- 5 Makes suggestions / takes initiatives to make improvements in the company
- 6 Responds positively to short-notice problems
- 7 Always operates within known health and safety rules
- 8 Excellent housekeeping standards maintained
- 9 No absence / timekeeping problems
- 10 Personal learning objective achieved every six months

While composing the list, managers realised they would have to provide everyone with the quality of equipment, tools, materials and training to make these standards readily achievable. Many accepted they would have work to do on that score. But that is the job of the manager – not just to set the standards, but to make it as easy as possible to achieve the standards required, to do the right thing.

## **Making Good Behaviour Commonplace**

When the list was presented to staff, it was explained that everyone who achieved these standards would be open to receive one week's pay as a lump sum every six months as a reward for their good performance. If their manager decided they deserved a tick against each item they would get all the money. If not, there would be no reward.

The announcement had an immediate effect. Staff started to clean up their work areas, suddenly the whole place began to look clean and tidy. People wanted to help out if there was a problem. Those who had often lingered in the cafeteria at lunch and break times started getting up from their tables to get back to work before their boss. Managers were amazed, they had never seen that before.

And of course they were delighted. It became clear that good behaviour and good performance was becoming the norm. And that's very important in any organisation – that renegade behaviour is not seen as 'cool' any more, on the contrary that good behaviour is accepted as 'cool'.

To reinforce that position, we encouraged managers to sit down with each individual six weeks or so before their formal appraisal to give them a reading on 'how they were doing'. They would first congratulate the individual on the items where they were doing well, then ask them what they could do on those where they were falling short, and what they as their manager could do to help them. That way the role of manager becomes much less critic, and more encourager and praiser of effort

and improvement wherever they see it. That positive reinforcement mode is most important if you want to make good behaviour commonplace in your organisation.

## **When Chastisement Is Necessary**

When all is said and done, there will always be some who will push the boundaries too far, either by lack of effort, repetitive default, or just simple defiance. If you are not to see your standards degenerate to a point of unmanageability, you have to take prompt and consistent action to bring any recalcitrants back within your OK BOX. That doesn't automatically mean by applying punishment or sanctions (although these can work, of course), but much more by persuading the individual that staying within the OK BOX is actually a much better option for them than not.

In this context, it is fundamental that the manager does not position him- or herself as the 'Enforcer' of discipline, the all-seeing critical eyes. That takes us back to the 100 Years' War scenario which makes life fraught for everyone on a daily basis. We need to make the individual responsible for their own behaviour, not the manager. The manager can be there to help the individual improve, but not to act as their ever-present overseer. The individual has to *manage themselves* to meet the standards and stay comfortably within the OK BOX.

To reinforce that position, we don't do any shouting or telling. On the contrary, when there is a behaviour problem to be solved, we only ask questions. The process is called 'Questions-Only Discipline', or QOD. There are only four questions involved, they are easy to remember, but they press the individual into taking responsibility for their own behaviour, and to making clear commitments about their future conduct. And, most important, they really work.

Initially, tell the individual involved that you would like a word with them privately. In doing this, your quiet but deliberate demeanour should convey the message that it is about something serious, so it is important not to be smiling at this point. Take them to a neutral location away from their normal work environment (your own office will do), and make sure you will be undisturbed by telephone or visitors.

Throughout this whole procedure, stay in adult mode the whole time. That means speaking calmly and firmly, and never raising your voice. Shouting is out. Losing your temper is out. Do not wag your finger and act like a sergeant-major, implying 'I could make your life a misery, if you don't do as your told, mate'. That means you are taking back the responsibility for that person's behaviour, and that's not the idea at all. Just accept that by going through this process, you will get a commitment from the individual that will be far more powerful and lasting, and give you a far more pleasant working atmosphere, than you would get by shouting and

threatening.

Now, here are the questions.

**1 Ask : Do you understand what the required standard is?**

Get your respondent to tell you precisely. Just saying “yes” is not enough. They have to tell you in their own words, specifically. They might hesitate, but press them into it. You have to hear the words coming out of their own mouth, then there is no doubt that they do understand. Explain calmly why the standard is necessary.

**2 Ask : Do you have a problem meeting the standard?**

They clearly do, otherwise you wouldn't be there together. If they prevaricate, don't be put off. Insist on hearing what the problems are. Often they find this embarrassing as their excuses are often woefully weak. But don't spare their embarrassment, as their discomfort will be a powerful incentive for them not to want to have such a meeting with you again.

Show you are listening intently to what they say. Indeed, it often helps to have a pad in front of you, and to be seen taking down everything they say (yes, it is serious). Don't start criticising or showing your irritation at this stage, otherwise they will clam up to avoid your further disapproval. Just keep asking questions if you need further clarification.

When you think you have all the problems listed, then say “All right, let's take each one of these, and see what we can do about them”. Note we are using the word 'we' now, implying that although the responsibility remains theirs, you are now on their side if they are ready to make the effort to resolve them. The task then is to end up with simple solutions to each of the problems they listed, which you think they will be able to carry through. When you are satisfied about that, then move on to question three.

**3 Ask : What can I expect in the future then?**

This is an important question. This is when your respondent articulates aloud their personal commitment to different behaviour, and that is fundamental. Do not say what you want. They must tell you what they are going to do in the future. When you finally endorse what they say, it must sound like that they have now 'made a contract' with you, and you should act like that is what it is.

If the vibes in the session make you feel that your respondent has made a true mental commitment to change, then you can end your meeting at this point. Only ask question four if you feel there is a danger they might default on their commitment, or they have failed to honour previous undertakings.

#### 4 Ask : What will we do if you don't?

Do not be fobbed off with throwaway answers. For example, if they say : “No, it’s all right, I’m going to do it”, you should reply to the effect : “Yes, I’m pleased about that, but I’m still asking the same question : ‘What will we do if you don’t?’ Where do you think that could lead?” The best outcome to that question is that they themselves articulate the undesirable consequences they will *bring upon themselves* if they don’t put things right now.

At the end they need to feel that the discomfort of this type of meeting is something they don’t want to repeat. On the contrary, conformance seems a much easier option all around. At this point you can allow yourself a smile, indicating that you’re pleased that the individual has chosen to work with you, and do the positive, sensible thing.

Effective discipline in any organisation is not about penalising and punishing the behaviour you don’t want to see; it is much more about encouraging the behaviour you *do* want to see. That means making clear what a good job looks like in the first place. Since most people actually prefer to do a good job, just making that clear will lead to the vast majority of your employees conforming to your reasonable standards without a problem.

However, when behaviour deteriorates to an unacceptable level, then asking the right questions, and placing the responsibility where it truly belongs, will be much more effective than any amounts of blustering and criticising. After all, external discipline exercised occasionally by you will never work as well as *self-discipline* exercised by the individual every hour of the day.

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