BUSINESS STUDENTS’ REPORTED PERCEPTIONS OF THE QUALITY OF
STUDENT-FACULTY RELATIONSHIPS THROUGH PEDAGOGICAL PRACTICES

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WHAT THE FRACK? ACTIVISM IN THE MARCELLUS SHALE REGION

Denise P. Ferguson, Pepperdine University
Michael F. Smith, LaSalle University

ASSESSING THE ABILITY OF VIRTUAL COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE
AS A SOCIAL MARKETING TOOL

Karin Reinhard, Baden Württemberg Cooperative State University Ravensburg
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CONTEMPORARY WORKPLACE PUNISHMENT AND
DISCIPLINE RECOMMENDATIONS

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Diane Bandow, Troy University

SPANISH TEENAGERS’ ATTITUDE AND ACCEPTANCE OF
MOBILE ADVERTISING

José Martí-Parreño, Universidad Europea de Madrid – Centro Adscrito Valencia
Silvia Sanz-Blas, Universidad de Valencia
Carla Ruiz-Mafé, Universidad de Valencia
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ABSTRACT

Although it is generally accepted that supervisors and managers should avoid punishment for its supposed negative side effects, this paper illustrates that once again conventional wisdom with respect to correcting worker misbehavior is wrong and that truth is not always politically correct or as reassuring as one would like. Given that disciplining employee misconduct can be helpful in numerous workplace contexts, a set of guidelines contributing to more effective application of negative sanctions for business is presented.

INTRODUCTION

American way of life is replete with encouragement to be cheerful, upbeat, and positive (Ehrenreich, 2009). This view seems to have been adopted by a relatively new field of research, Positive Organizational Scholarship (POS), which studies how organizations develop human strengths, foster vitality and resilience, unlock potential, and pursue what has come to be known as ennobling behavior (Dutton & Sonenshein, 2009; Luthans & Youssef, 2007). POS investigates positive deviance, or the ways in which organizations and their members flourish and prosper in especially favorable ways (Cameron & Caza, 2004). New paradigms like POS invariably involve collective acceptance by those who work within them of the fresh concepts, methods, and research strategies that distinguish that paradigm from what came before. Endorsement of those new features can become so strong that proponents risk overlooking, or even disparaging, both findings from previous research and potentially valuable alternative approaches (Hackman, 2009).

Such seems to be the case regarding workplace punishment. With the accent on positive organizational phenomena there has been a tendency to minimize the importance and contributions of negative behaviors including discipline, negative sanctions, penalties, aversive control, and correction. Despite the generally accepted belief suggesting that workplace punishment should be avoided and that positive consequences should be emphasized, it remains an important aspect of almost all supervisors’ jobs (Butterfield, Trevino, Wade, & Ball, 2005). Miner and Brewer (1976) found that 83 percent of the companies they surveyed used punishment or threats of punishment to deal with employee problems. Sims (1980) suggested that “managers eventually do use aversive behavior [punishment] even though they may be reluctant to admit it” (p. 57). This is due to the non-humanitarian aspects invoked by the thought of punishment as a motivator (Nehrbass, 1979) and the beliefs of human relations and human resources approaches...
to management which assume, either implicitly or explicitly, a human potential or growth-oriented perspective that runs counter to punishment and correction approaches which implies coercion and restraint, not growth (Miles, 1975). Some argue that punishment in organizations is "old-fashioned and reflects a 'tribal mentality' and reverts to the retributive justice theme of 'an eye for an eye'" (Arvey & Ivancevich, 1980, p. 125) and thus promote the use of positive consequences to shape behavior (Luthans & Kreitner, 1975). Not only, they say, is punishment less effective than positive reinforcement but it also results in undesirable side effects (Skilmer, 1948). Arvey and Ivancevich (1980), note, however, that there is little empirical evidence for either of these criticisms. Further, punishment has been used effectively in clinical and laboratory settings (Harris & Ersner-Hershfield, 1978) as well as in organizational situations (Arvey, Davis, & Nelson, 1984; Podsakoff & Todor, 1985).

Regardless, the use of punishment by managers and supervisors in organizations to address worker misconduct continues to be a common occurrence and involves the presentation of some unpleasant event or removal of a positive event following an undesirable employee behavior which decreases the frequency of the worker’s response (Kazadin, 1975). Misconduct is defined here from the punishing agent’s perspective as behavior that falls short of the agent’s moral or technical work standards (Trevino, 1992). Given this definition, employee theft, drug or alcohol abuse, tardiness, excessive absenteeism or sick leave use, insubordination, and below standard work performance may all qualify as misconduct (Redeker, 1984).

The importance of aversive control is further highlighted by the fact that most employee handbooks and organizational policy and procedure manuals give considerable discussion to punishment and worker disciplinary procedures. Almost all managers report that they find it necessary to occasionally impose negative sanctions ranging from verbal reprimands to employee suspensions or firings (Butterfield, Trevino, & Ball, 1996; Casey, 1997). Additionally, many followers realize the importance of punishment when it is used carefully. One study showed that almost 50 percent of workers believed that managers are too lenient with poor performers and more discipline was necessary (Veiga, 1988). This overemphasis on refraining from aversive organizational control techniques must allow for the possibility that, at times, they are necessary and appropriate and can be positively related to enhanced performance (e.g., O’Reilly & Puffer, 1989; Podsakoff & Todor, 1985). Linking negative sanctions to poor performance or unwanted behaviors can actually improve group performance, decrease undesired behaviors, and increase employee satisfaction (Podsakoff, Podsakoff, & Kuskova, 2010). It is an important form of leader behavior that provides followers with a clear signal regarding what is unacceptable. In contrast, employees who deserve, but do not receive, punishment provide an example to others that such behavior will not be disciplined. This is a dangerous signal that is likely to encourage the same types of behaviors leaders want followers to refrain from exhibiting.

Finally, Podsakoff (1982) reviewed the evidence and concluded that high performing leaders typically used both positive and negative sanctions while Arvey, Davis, and Nelson (1984) argued that effective management requires supervisors to exhibit both reward and punishment behavior towards employees. Thus, punishment should not be automatically eliminated as a tool to motivate and redirect workers. Accordingly, we offer some recommendations about how
leaders can improve their effectiveness in administering aversive consequences in organizational settings.

GUIDELINES FOR INCREASING WORKER DISCIPLINE EFFECTIVENESS

This section provides a number of guidelines to enhance negative sanction’s usefulness in the 21st century. These aversive control procedures are appropriate only after a supervisor has determined—perhaps through a process similar to Mager and Pipe’s (1984) analyzing performance problems—that an employee does not have a skill or ability deficiency (perhaps because of a lack of training), or that there are obstacles beyond the employee’s control, such as inadequate equipment or disruptive colleagues. The point is that if the cause of an employee’s problem is outside his or her control, then punishment is not proper. If an employee can perform but does not, then punishment may be needed and the following guidelines then come into play. These guidelines are largely taken from the basic reinforcement paradigm applied to organizations (organizational behavior modification) developed by Luthans and Kreitner (1975, 1985), Bandura’s (1986) social learning theory, and the organizational justice literature (Cropanzano, Bowen, & Gilliland, 2007). Table 1 summarizes these guidelines followed by a discussion of each recommendation.

TABLE 1. CONTEMPORARY EMPLOYEE DISCIPLINE GUIDELINES

| 1) Tie punishment directly as possible to the particular worker misconduct. |
| 2) Provide employee alternative, appropriate behaviors. |
| 3) Time discipline so that it is not too soon or not too late. |
| 4) Maintain privacy of discipline (generally). |
| 5) Ensure fairness and justness of discipline. |
| a. Distributive justice |
| b. Procedural justice |
| c. Interpersonal justice |
| d. Informational justice |
| 6) Maintain appropriate documentation of the corrective discipline. |

Tie punishment directly as possible to the particular worker misconduct

This guideline involves the issue of contingency which refers to the principle that in order for punishment to be effective it must be associated with or linked to a particular inappropriate behavior (Arvey & Jones, 1985; Luthans & Kreitner, 1975, 1985). Setting up contingencies involves designating behaviors and assigning consequences to follow which entails creating, either directly or implied, ‘if-then’ behavioral rules (Ruben & Ruben, 1985; “if you eat your dinner then you can have dessert”). Examples of effective punishment behaviors employing appropriate use of organizational contingencies might include the following: supervisor displeasure shown when a follower’s work is below departmental standards; reprimanding a follower if her work is consistently below her capabilities; recommending no pay increase for a worker if his performance is below goal; and giving undesirable job assignments to followers who are late to work. Previous research has shown that contingency is associated with punishment effectiveness (Arvey & Jones, 1985; Hinkin & Schriesheim, 2004). Moreover,
Podsakoff, Todor, Grover, and Huber (1984) found that appropriate contingent punishment did not adversely influence satisfaction with supervisors while Atwater, Camobreco, Dionne, Avolio, and Lau (1997) found that managerial contingent punishment was related to charisma. Only when noncontingent punishment (i.e., arbitrarily or without reference to the follower's performance) was used did satisfaction with supervisors suffer. This is consistent with Atwater, Dionne, Camobreco, Avolio, and Lau (1998) who found that contingent punishment positively impacted leader effectiveness while noncontingent punishment negatively impacted manager success.

Noncontingent punishment has also been associated with more highly negative emotions such as anger (Mikula, 1986) and moral outrage (Bies, 1987). Additional support was also provided by Korukonda and Hunt (1989) who found that positive affect toward the leader is aroused by both contingent and non-contingent rewards; however, only contingent punishment resulted in significantly improved performance. This suggests that how a leader administers punishment can impact the perception followers have of their supervisors. Non-contingent and arbitrary punishment suggests a bad leader whereas contingent punishment enhanced outcomes without distorting follower perceptions. When managers eliminated positive comments on performance, a negative and direct relationship developed between worker effectiveness and worker satisfaction occurred (Hinkin & Schriesheim, 2004), suggesting that ignoring positive behavior will cause eventual extinction; conversely, ignoring negative behavior is a form of endorsement and acceptance. When managers ignore negative behaviors, they are, in effect, supporting them (Thornton, 2011).

Behavioral psychologist and premier performance management expert Aubrey Daniels (2001) similarly speaks to the importance of contingency when he said that “Always be positive is the worst advice you could ever give or receive” (p. 44). There are times when a person’s conduct does not warrant the supervisor being positive and rewarding such behaviors can be detrimental to a well-functioning company or the long-term success of a worker or group. Indeed, rewarding individuals indiscriminately by always being positive fails to teach and clarify for workers what are the rules. Making punishment contingent on specific follower behaviors and informing followers of this contingency can be a valuable tool for managers in aligning worker behavior with organizations’ purposes. Employees generally recognize that it is useful to have information on what leader’s desire and what they do not want.

Provide employee alternative, appropriate behaviors

Behavioral reinforcement studies from the educational arena (e.g., Educational Services Center, 1998; What Teachers Need to Know about Learning, n. d.) overwhelmingly advocate providing students with alternative, constructive behaviors to replace specific maladaptive behavior. Application of such a behavioral guideline is also proper within an organizational behavior context; i.e., a manager’s criticism of an employee should be followed by teaching a new alternative behavior to replace the specific inappropriate behavior (Daniels, 2001). Hellriegel and Slocum (2007) note that punishment trains a person in what not to do, not in what to do. Therefore, an effective supervisor must clearly specify what the employee should do to avoid punishment in the future and offer an alternative behavior. When punishment to eliminate inappropriate behavior is used in conjunction with positive reinforcement to teach alternative
behaviors, emotional side effects such as fear and dislike of supervisors, and attempts to escape or avoid work are less likely to occur (What Teachers Need to Know about Learning, n. d.). Providing alternative, productive behaviors to trainees has also been a fundamental learning principle incorporated into many management development programs, including the popular Interaction Management workshop of Development Dimensions International, a highly successful management training and consulting organization emphasizing behavioral methods and techniques (Pesuric & Byham, 1996).

**Time discipline so as not to be too soon or not too late**

Timeliness is also important for worker punishment because it increases the perceived connection between the punishment and the misconduct (Arvey & Ivancevich, 1980; Arvey & Jones, 1985). Punishment tends to work immediately and so if a behavior needs to stop without delay, as in matters of ethical and safety violations, then punishment can be used as an effective strategy (Daniels & Daniels, 2005).

Nevertheless, it may be best to not take punitive action without some review. There can be many extenuating circumstances associated with inappropriate behavior. Therefore, supervisors must evaluate the situation thoroughly before deciding on any punitive action. Additionally, delaying criticism may be prudent if the manager is unsure how to administer discipline correctly or has concerns regarding procedural issues (Butterfield et al., 1996). Atwater, Waldman, Carey, and Cartier (2001) found that both managers and recipients recognized that managers often make mistakes in the employee correction process. They also noted that managers often make mistakes because they were often “out of control” (Atwater et al., 2001, p. 267). Thus, it may be desirable to delay punishment if a manager’s emotional state would likely lead to an unduly harsh interaction with a worker. All too often, persons in authority tend to criticize subordinates only when they are upset, angry, and no longer able to hold their temper in check (Baron, 1988). Because of the criticizer’s strong emotions, feedback is typically delivered in a biting, sarcastic tone that includes threats of termination, demotion, transfer, and other negative outcomes (Heldmann, 1988). Such criticism is highly dysfunctional.

Hence some delay in administering punishment may be appropriate—but not too much of a postponement. This is because many managers who wait too long to deliver negative feedback to others often let it fester and then blow-up at the target employee thus creating an even more problematic situation (Larson, 1986). The feedback they supply then is likely to be ineffective and may exact serious costs for organizational commitment, job-related motivation, and negative attitudes toward supervisors or toward appraisal procedures generally (Ilgen, Mitchell, & Fredrickson, 1981).

**Maintain privacy of discipline (generally)**

Consistent with good behavioral feedback principles discussed earlier, researchers suggest that worker punishment should be carried out in private whenever possible (Arvey & Ivancevich, 1980; Arvey & Jones, 1985). Evidence has suggested that punishment tends to create less defensiveness and to be more instructive to subordinates when carried out in private (Sims,
In addition, private punishment may be considered more benevolent since employees are not humiliated in front of co-workers (Butterfield et al., 2005).

Still, supervisors must be concerned with group performance and so punishment may provide an opportunity for the work leader to deter others from engaging in future instances of the offense by showing what can happen when undesirable behavior is exhibited (Carlsmith, Darley, & Robinson, 2002). Bandura’s (1986) social learning theory posits that people learn from one another, via imitation, modeling, and by observing the consequences that others experience following their behavior. Punishment viewed as a social event may serve to uphold social norms within a group, signal appropriate and inappropriate behaviors to observers, and deter misconduct in social group members. Social learning theory suggests that individuals are less likely to engage in modeled behavior if they perceive that there will be punishing consequences than if they anticipate positive outcomes. Also, O’Reilly and Puffer (1989) found that participants in their studies were more willing to work hard, felt more satisfied, and perceived more equitable treatment from their supervisors when they observed them punishing poorly performing team members than when such individuals received no reprimand. Similarly, Podsakoff and Todor (1985) found that supervisors who failed to discipline worker misbehavior occasioned feelings of inequity and lowered motivation, commitment, and cohesiveness among productive group members. Research by Schnake and Dumler (1989) supported this view and found that supervisors who failed to discipline others’ inappropriate behavior was perceived as punishment by those performing at high levels and that leaders who punished unwanted employee behavior was viewed as rewarding by these high performers! Finally, employees are more likely to model caustic behavior of others if they must work closely with them in order to do their job (Wagemen, 2000). This is noteworthy given that task interdependence is growing as organizations move toward the use of self-managed work teams and decentralized organizational structures (Erez, LePine, & Elms, 2002).

Thus, for punishment to have social meaning, worker discipline needs to be made known to observers in some way (Trevino & Ball, 1992). There are a number of reasons why letting all employees know what happens to those who misbehave can be beneficial. Accordingly, it is important that some consideration be given to publicly disciplining wrong doers so that other potential offenders learn by example and discover the costs of misbehavior. A justification for punishment lies in its ability to minimize future offenses. As one manager indicated when discipline was imposed, “other workers learned that they can’t get away with anything like that in the future” (Butterfield et al., 1996, p. 1493). Public punishment, however, does not mean public humiliation. Degrading or belittling followers in the presence of others is likely to create animosity toward the manager and promote a culture of fear. But public admonishments are distasteful to many and Trevino and Ball (1992) offer a compromise position with respect to privacy: an organization might publicize information about offenses and managerial responses without identifying the offender or the specifics of the incident. Such a practice has been used successfully at the U.S. Military Academy at West Point.

Ensure fairness and justness of discipline

Employee discipline is one of the most litigated issues in the workplace (Zwerin, 2005). One means of preventing legal challenges while ensuring the effectiveness of disciplinary actions is
to ensure the fairness and justness of the punishment process. Organizational justice—members’ sense of the moral propriety of how they are treated—is the “glue” that allows people to work together effectively (Cropanzano et al., 2007, p. 34). Justice defines the very essence of individuals’ relationship to employers and is especially important with respect to issues of worker misconduct. Coworkers need to perceive that the punishment given to the recipient was fair. If observers view the punishment as fair, rarely do they have negative attitudes concerning the event. Additionally, Ball, Trevino, and Sims (1994) observed that positive outcomes result because subordinates perceive punishment as just. More specifically, fairness has been found to be positively associated with job satisfaction, organizational commitment, job performance, and organizational citizenship behavior and negatively associated with absenteeism and turnover intentions (Conlon, Meyer, & Nowakowski, 2005).

All else being equal, employees trust authorities who allocate outcomes fairly (distributive justice); make decisions in a consistent, unbiased, and accurate way (procedural justice); and communicate decision-making details in a respectful (interpersonal justice), comprehensive, and honest manner (informational justice; George & Jones, 2008). Trust increases fairness and this is important because authorities who treat employees justly encounter fewer legal challenges and a more positive workplace environment (Lind, 2001). Leaders who want to increase the (perceived) fairness of punishment behaviors so as to increase their effectiveness must address these four considerations which are presented in greater detail below.

**Distributive justice**

A distributive justice approach suggests that the negative sanction(s) imposed (e.g., temporary suspension, fine) should involve a consistent, fair, and appropriately severe outcome (Butterfield et al., 2005). That is, for a given incident of misconduct, a subordinate is expected to receive punishment similar to and appropriately severe compared to what others have received in similar situations. There is a long-time workplace principle that states, “It is better to not have a rule than to have a rule which is enforced unfairly” (Cronin, 2006). This principle recognizes the reality that firms multiply their problems and create problems for themselves when they issue an employee handbook containing disciplinary procedures and then permit supervisors to play favorites and enforce punitive measures on a selective basis.

Determining severity of punishment involves a number of considerations. Certainly, one concern involves what has taken place before with other similar misconduct and whether the contemplated negative sanction is consistent with previous management action. Other factors involve the two broad justifications for the use of punishment (Carlsmith et al., 2002). One perspective holds that when an individual violates its rules in some normatively unallowable way, the scales of organizational justice are out of balance and sanctions against the individual restores this balance. Under this perspective, the perpetrator deserves to be punished in proportion to the past harm he or she committed. An opposing perspective holds that harmony is best served by the prevention of future harm and that the justification for punishment lies in its ability to minimize the likelihood of future transgressions. Thus, the severity of punishment should be consistent with what has been done historically and whether the discipline is perceived as deserving and acts as an appropriate deterrent to future misconduct.
Inconsistent disciplinary actions undermine goal achievement (Bielous, 1998), decrease employee morale (Podsakoff, 1982), and send the message to employees that certain inappropriate behaviors may, at times, be acceptable (Bellizzi, 2006). Weiss (1997) states that disciplining employees inconsistently is among the most serious human resource situations affecting workplace ethics and Bielous (1998) identified the uneven bending of rules for particular individuals as one of the five worst disciplinary mistakes organizations make.

The impartial application of punishment, however, can be difficult. Lucero and Allen (2006) reported an example of two employees who were fighting and were found to be equally responsible. In this case termination of both employees may have been warranted but on further investigation one worker was found to have been employed only a few months during which he had performance and attendance problems while the other was a long-tenure worker with an excellent performance and attendance history. Even though the offense was the same for both workers it could be persuasively argued that the long-tenure employee with only this single infraction should receive a less severe discipline than the problematic short-term worker.

Another consideration involves mitigating circumstances. These are conditions that represent a broad set of concerns that include: the severity of the incident, the intent of the protagonist, the employee’s responsibility for any harm done, participation of other employees, and any supervisory involvement or neglect. In addition, the employee’s work record, length of service, discipline history, and potential for rehabilitation need to be considered when deciding on a fitting level of punishment for an offense (Koven & Smith, 1985). Even though the general rule is to impose similar punishment for similar offenses, managers must weigh an assortment of factors and impose different penalties if reasonable distinctions among like cases can be made. For this reason, ‘no tolerance’ approaches which support the same treatment for all may be inappropriate.

**Procedural justice**

Individuals are not only concerned with the outcomes they receive but also with the fairness of the process used in determining the punishment rendered. Workers are likely to accept unfavorable outcomes as fair if they perceive the discipline procedure to be reasonable and where authorities adhere to rules of fair process (Cropanzano, Byrne, Bobocel, & Rupp, 2001). That is, the process of determining if punishment is necessary may be as important to employees as the punishment itself.

In determining procedural justice, a framework involving a number of questions may be addressed by management (Daugherty, 1966; Lucero & Allen, 2006) including:

1. Was there forewarning? Before employees can be properly disciplined they must be told what constitutes misconduct. Organizations should provide clear policies—clear enough for every worker to understand—that are disseminated to each employee to read. Then, each employee should sign a document acknowledging receipt and understanding of the policy. After that, each new hire should also sign a document acknowledging receipt and understanding of the policy before beginning work.
2. Is the regulation or policy reasonable? The rules leading to worker punishment must be reasonable. Reasonable rules are those that promote the efficient, orderly, and safe conduct of business or that define behaviors that employers can realistically expect from their employees (Daughety, 1966).

3. Was there a full investigation and was it objective? Before making a decision regarding discipline the organization must investigate the apparent rule violation. The just cause standard requires full and fair investigations before worker discipline can be imposed. This should prevent the discipline from being imposed when there is little or no evidence of rule violation (Ruben, Elkouri, & Elkouri, 2003). A preliminary conversation with the accused employee is advisable. Shapiro and Brett (2005) suggest that the ability to express one’s view, often referred to as “voice,” plays an important role in how individuals judge the fairness of procedures.

4. Was there sufficient indication of guilt? The investigation must yield enough evidence to warrant the conclusion that the employee was guilty of the infraction. Was there reasonable evidence to implicate the worker? Often this involves conflicting views of an incident. Managers must consider issues, including an individual’s past record of truthfulness, as well as any apparent motivation he or she might have to lie (Hill & Sinicropi, 1980).

5. Do the procedures have built in mechanisms for appeals (Colquitt, Lepine, & Wesson, 2011)?

**Interpersonal justice**

A third form of organizational justice is concerned with the perceived fairness of the interpersonal treatment workers receive from their managers (Colquitt, 2001). This is also known as interactional justice and focuses on the manager/subordinate relationship relative to how individuals treat each other (Cropanzano et al., 2007). It is important for supervisors to be courteous and polite and to treat employees with dignity and respect to promote interpersonal justice (Greenberg, 1990a). Additionally, managers should refrain from making disparaging remarks or belittling subordinates when administering aversive control (Bies, 2005). From a slightly different perspective, it can be said that interpersonal injustice occurs when authorities are rude or disrespectful to workers, or when they refer to them with inappropriate or offensive labels (Bies, 2001). This fairness dimension is being extended to workplace abuse and harassment known as bullying which is coming under increasing legal scrutiny (Von Bergen, Zavaletta, & Soper, 2006).

A related issue concerns performance feedback. As Schein (1989) noted, “... The only reliable way to improve performance is to give performance feedback” (p. 67) and negative feedback is often necessary (Ilgen et al., 1981). Importantly, however, Baron (1988) found that it was generally not the delivery of negative feedback, per se, that produced such unconstructive outcomes as increased levels of conflict, resentment, and aggression; rather, it was the manner in which such information was conveyed that seemed to play a crucial role. Baron (1988) found that performance discussions about poor performance using constructive criticism (feedback that is specific, considerate, and contains no threats or suggestions that an individual’s poor performance is due to negative internal attributions such as the person being stupid or lazy) did not lead to such negative effects. In comparison to constructive criticism, destructive criticism is
characterized by negative feedback that is general, inconsiderate and harsh in tone, contains threats of termination or reassignment, and attributes poor performance to internal causes, has been found to generate stronger feelings of anger and tension among recipients and to increase recipients’ tendency to adopt ineffective techniques for dealing with poor performance (e.g., making endless excuses, refusing to change). Clearly, managers should engage in constructive suggestions with their disciplined subordinates regarding how they might improve their performance in the future.

**Informational justice**

This aspect of organizational justice captures employee perceptions of the extent to which employers explain to workers their decisions, the honesty of the explanations, and the procedures used to arrive at them. When manager’s explanations of their disciplinary decisions are thorough, and when subordinates perceive these explanations as well-reasoned and truthful, perceptions of informational justice are likely to be high (Colquitt & Shaw, 2005). Research has shown that reactions to bad news are more positive when clear explanations are given (Bies, Shapiro, & Cummings, 1988). Likewise, Shaw, Wild, and Colquitt (2003) noted that individuals are generally more likely to perceive their workplace as fair and are less likely to exhibit retaliatory response to negative outcomes when these outcomes are accompanied by explanations from organizational representatives.

An employee who is punished for no discernible reason may believe the punishment to be unjustified and that the negative sanction was random or a personal attack by the supervisor rather than a consequence for unwanted behavior. The employee will likely have a negative emotional reaction and the punishment may have an undesired effect on individual and group work behavior (Podsakoff et al., 1984). When perceived as unfair, employees may retaliate in order to counter the apparent injustice and to restore some semblance of equity.

This seems to have happened in a study by Greenberg (1990b) that nicely illustrated the impact of informational justice on manufacturing workers’ reactions to a pay cut for a 10-week period brought on by economic circumstances. In one plant no pay cut was initiated (control group); in a second plant workers were told in a short, impersonal explanation that they would receive a 15% pay reduction and in a third plant employees were offered a longer, more sincere explanation why they would be receiving a 15% cut in compensation. Theft levels were then tracked before, during, and after the 10-week pay cut period using company shrinkage data. In the plant without the pay cut, employee theft remained about 3% throughout the study. In the plant with the long, sincere explanation the employee theft increased from 3% to about 4.8% and then fell back to normal levels of 3% after the pay cut period ended. In the plant given a short, impersonal explanation, employee theft rose dramatically from 3% to 8% during the pay cut period before falling back to previous 3% levels once employee pay was reinstated. Clearly, the higher levels of informational justice had a significant impact on employee theft.

**Maintain appropriate documentation of the corrective discipline**

No discussion of worker misconduct can end without addressing documentation. The world is becoming increasingly litigious and one of the most essential guidelines for handling any and all
worker disciplinary action is documentation. The goal of documentation is to memorialize the firm’s efforts to address problematic behavior (Clancy & Warner, 1999). When followed regularly, accurate and contemporaneous documentation will add authenticity and credibility to the events leading to the supervisory action and will help the organization prevail against claims of wrongful discharge, breach of contract, and discrimination. Furthermore, documentation will make it difficult to doubt the motives of the manager. Taking notes during or immediately after a discipline interview will create a record of what happened and support personnel decisions.

Maintaining a journal with dated notes of any and all conferences that take place in the manager’s office should become routine, and in a litigated matter, could prove invaluable. Retrieval of those notes when needed will provide detailed and recorded observations that memory cannot provide. While showing fairness and equity, documentation reflects sound and rational judgment on the part of management. Notes, journals, and observations are the “back-up” to any memorandum. Therefore, they should be kept as part of the supervisor’s file in a secure area. If there are no documents, the employee is much more likely to win should there be a court case (e.g., Lloyd v. Georgia Gulf Corp., 1992). Employment punishment administered and then overturned by a court, mediator, arbitrator, or an organization’s human resources department reduces its effectiveness over the long run.

To increase the value of the documentation should litigation arise it is important that individuals stay with the facts and provide details but be concise and do not editorialize, neutralize their tone, keep emotion out, and avoid sarcasm (Bruce, 2011). Additionally, Attorney West, principal at Employment Practices Specialists in Pacifica, California, indicated that it is critical to get the employee’s explanation for performance issues and to include it in such documentation. According to West this does several things:

1. Ties the employee to his or her “story.” From a legal perspective, that’s important, West notes. If you do not pin the employee down to a specific explanation, a clever attorney may later come up with another explanation that could be plausible to a jury or government agent.
2. Shows two-way communication. Including the explanation indicates that authorities want to find out if there is something positive that they can do to improve things.
3. Demonstrates supervisory fairness. Juries are often more motivated by their sense of fairness than by the specifics of the law in question.
4. May help a manager correct employee performance. Supervisors should be perceived as wanting to help employees improve and be productive staff members.
5. May reveal a reasonable explanation. It is normal to assume that there is no reasonable explanation, but there may be. For example, perhaps materials run out at certain times and that is interfering with production, or perhaps there is a child with a terrible illness, and that is responsible for an employee being 10 minutes late (HR Daily Advisor, 2011).

CONCLUSION

Management training generally takes a proscribed view of punishment, emphasizing alternatives to punishment (Casey, 1997). Likewise, more academically-oriented management and business texts appear to stress positive emotions and positive managerial behavior and seldom address
punishment (e.g., Daft, 2003), indirectly suggesting that worker discipline is not an essential part of the managerial role. For example, a cursory review of a current popular organizational behavior textbook by Ivancevich, Konopaske, and Matteson (2005) revealed that the authors dedicated five pages to punishment-related topics and seventy-seven pages to reward-related subject matter. Moreover, in many textbooks, the discussion of punishment has focused primarily on the presumed negative side effects such as anger, resentment, avoidance, and retaliation (Luthans, 1995; Moorhead & Griffin, 1995). This has led many readers to conclude that punishment should be avoided, regardless of its effectiveness in guiding behavior. Consequently, managers and supervisors learn little about applying punishment properly even though it is an important aspect of virtually all managerial jobs and is a common occurrence.

Many instances of life’s unpleasantness teach us what to do by means of punishment and aversiveness. Falling off a bike, drinking too much alcohol, or going out in the rain without an umbrella all lead to punishing consequences (getting bruised, suffering a hangover, and getting wet), and we often learn to change our behavior accordingly. Furthermore, certain types of undesirable behavior may have far-reaching negative effects if they go unpunished. For instance, an employee who sexually harasses a coworker, a clerk who steals money from the petty cash account, and an executive who engages in illegal stock transactions may all deserve punishment.

Even though many experts question the value of aversive control and believe that managers use it inappropriately, punishment does have a place in managerial behavior. The process of punishing wrongdoing, though, need not be callous, unduly harsh, or sadistic. The focus must remain on changing behavior to improve performance. The purpose of this article was intended to promote skilled and constructive use of worker discipline and punishment when it is warranted by offering several guidelines to enhance its effectiveness. The recommendations on the productive use of aversive control suggested in this paper are consistent with theoretical perspectives and empirical findings in the literatures of organizational behavior modification, social learning theory, and organizational justice. This paper should not be interpreted as implying that managers should blissfully punish every undesired behavior. If supervisors find they are using punishment more often than positive reinforcement, then they are doing something wrong.

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