Mentoring, Coaching and Corrective Action Guidelines for University of Idaho Supervisors of Staff

The following are guidelines to help supervisors assist staff to succeed in their jobs. Faculty processes differ and we encourage you to contact the office of the Provost and consult the Faculty Staff Handbook for more information about helping faculty succeed through performance issues.

FSH 3190 Diminished Performance of Employees touches on our collective desire to, when appropriate, recognize diminished performance issues and do what we can to help an employee turn these around. We value our staff and invest in them heavily through the initial training periods and beyond. It makes good sense to give people an opportunity to improve performance deficiencies or change behavioral-related problems to help them succeed at the University of Idaho. There are situations in which an act or actions require more aggressive disciplinary action up to dismissal.

FSH 3920 Dismissal and Discipline of Exempt Employees and Discipline and FSH 3930 Separation of Classified Employees outline or otherwise discuss "adequate cause," circumstances when discipline or dismissal may be appropriate and the required due process steps associated with them.

Most performance or behavioral issues can be corrected. Providing an employee that opportunity, as soon as the issues are identified, is a key competency of a good supervisor.

Why should we care about correcting performance or behavior? It is often the right thing to do. It is often the fair thing to do for the employee and those whom the employee serves including our students, co-workers, alumni, donors, parents, potential students and the general public. Not addressing performance or behavioral issues usually does our community and the employee a disservice and can put the University at risk in some situations.

You always have a great partner and support system in Human Resources to help you with employee issues. Following are coaching and corrective action guidelines and resources available to you to help your employees succeed and to help protect you and the University.

The overarching term commonly used for this is "performance management" which actually starts on an employee's first day with setting expectations, orienting and training, developing goals and establishing the criteria by which an employee's performance will be valued and evaluated. For these guidelines, we jump ahead to the moment when an employee's performance, actions or behaviors need correcting.

Three Corrective Categories

1. Coaching and Mentoring

Coaching and mentoring start with setting expectations but once an issue arises, we should address it. Tools available at this step include a *Verbal Warning*, usually summarized in a follow up document sometimes called a *Summary of Meeting*, (or at least documented for the supervisor's file) or a *Performance Development Plan*. Also in this stage is the opportunity to evaluate what additional training, coaching or mentoring an employee may need to help his or her success.

2. Corrective Action

Corrective action typically includes a *Letter of Warning* or a *Letter of Reprimand*. When warranted, *Performance-Related Probation* for a period between 30 and 90 days may be appropriate. With probation, comes the requirement for the supervisor to include sufficient clarity and direction, either through a *Professional Development Plan* or some other means.

3. Discipline

Discipline may include suspension without pay, involuntary demotion, involuntary transfer, revocation of driving privileges (in some cases), disciplinary reduction in pay, (temporarily or permanently) or termination. Our due process system requires us to provide adequate notice to an employee called *Notice of Contemplated Action* which gives the employee an opportunity to respond to the notice prior to the application of any discipline. Discipline or a Notice of Contemplated Action usually follow either an act or omission that falls within the interpretation of adequate cause or after unsuccessful efforts by the department to help an employee improve or correct their work performance.

Notice of Contemplated Action

This is the form and the process used by the University to provide an employee facing disciplinary action, an opportunity to respond to the contemplated action before discipline is administered. This process must by coordinated through HR and the General Counsel's office. Although the outcome is often dismissal, it doesn't have to be. Sometimes things are learned through this due process that prompt the University to take an action different from that which was originally contemplated or even no action at all.

Performance Issues versus Behavioral Issues

Performance or work-related performance problems typically include problems directly affecting the actual work (or lack of work) including meeting deadlines, productivity, quality of work, quantity of work, accuracy, attention to detail, timeliness and other measurable things. Although behavioral issues usually contribute to work-performance problems, they can be identified separately and as a subset of work performance. In many cases, a behavioral issue can be corrected immediately by an employee if he or she chooses. HR lumps attendance, absenteeism and tardiness in with behavioral issues as long as the absences or tardiness are not otherwise protected by law. Work performance often takes time to improve and to measure. Because behavioral issues can be corrected much more quickly, HR does not recommend probation or a Professional Developmental Plan (PDP) for behavioral issues alone.

Fact Finding

Before issuing anything related to corrective actions or even coaching or mentoring, a supervisor should establish the facts. For example, what performance expectations are not being met? What happened at the event in question? What is the employee's perspective or reasoning? How do we know the employee knew about the expectations? How have you handled similar situations in the past?

The risk of taking only one side of a story or extrapolating from a minimum of established facts is that we can jump to the wrong conclusion – a conclusion that would have been different if we simply asked a few questions. Employees appreciate this effort and fairness and are more likely to respond to correction if a supervisor takes the time to ask their perspective.

Your HR Business partner can help you with your fact-finding questions and structure and is available to participate in the meetings with you. HR's participation in the meetings is strongly encouraged if the potential outcome of the fact-finding is a letter of reprimand or higher level discipline.

Verbal Warning

Also called verbal counseling, a verbal warning is a wonderful tool to informally provide guidance to an employee, usually in a less-threatening manner than other types of correction. Documentation is crucial, right from this step. HR recommends either summarizing the verbal warning meeting and giving it to the employee as a **Summary of Meeting** or just document the action/behavior observed, what was said in the verbal warning and dates and times of both. This documentation should be kept in the supervisor's file for that employee.

Letter of Warning

A letter of warning can be a great step between a verbal warning and a letter of reprimand. As always, the situation will help guide us to the right step so you don't have to feel compelled to issue a letter of warning before a letter of reprimand. It depends on the transgression or performance issue, the timing, circumstances, how you have handled similar situations in the past and your expectations. A Letter of Warning often follows a verbal discussion with the employee to establish the facts. Templates for all of these letters are available from your HR Business Partner.

Letter of Reprimand

A letter of reprimand is a step up the seriousness scale and may be the last step before discipline. Reprimands can be accompanied by a Professional Development Plan and/or Probation but need not be – saving probation for the right circumstances if the reprimand does not work.

Some supervisors are wary of jumping to a reprimand, often worrying about angering the employee or making the situation worse. If we recall that the whole purpose at this point is to help the employee succeed, also helping those around the employee, then a clear, definitive and serious step like this can be a great tool to get an employee's attention and help them understand their employment could be at risk. HR rarely advises administering a letter of reprimand twice for the same or similar issue.

Entrance Probation versus Performance-Related Probation

Classified staff serve a six-month **entrance probation** period to give both the University a chance to evaluate that employee's likelihood of success and to give the employee a chance to determine if he or she is in the right job. It is very important for supervisors to provide clear expectations, guidance, training and be available to help the employee learn the job. Sometimes, even when we do this, we discover that the employee is just not meeting our expectations. We encourage supervisors to provide frequent counseling, advising and verbal warnings to an entrance probation employee and to document those discussions. HR does not recommend a letter of warning, reprimand or other discipline short of termination for an employee on entrance probation.

In some unique circumstances, entrance probation can be extended. Because this extends an employee's ability to become certified in a position, we should only use it in limited circumstances – usually when an employee has not had the opportunity to receive sufficient training for a position.

Guidelines for Extending Entrance Probation

- Employee missed a month or more of work due to illness or other acceptable reason
- Employee training was unavailable and additional training and time will likely lead to the employee successfully passing probation (Note: a supervisor's failure to ensure available training was delivered does not count).
- The job is so technically complex that any individual in the job deserves additional time for the supervisor to be able to evaluate performance (Note: this assumes the supervisor has been working closely with and evaluating the employee's performance along the way and has the documentation to back it up)

Entrance probation should not be extended because a supervisor failed to adequately supervise or review and evaluate the employee's work during this period. If it becomes clear that the employee is not likely to work out, it does both the employee and the University a service to end that relationship. Do not wait until the sixth month because processing and notice time require us to make the determination by about the five month mark.

Performance-related probation or **"probation"** as it is more commonly referred, is typically 90 days in length with a formal review at 30, 60 and 90 days. It typically is used when an employee needs a reasonable period of time to turn a work performance issue around and prove it through measurable criteria. This type of probation should come with clearly identified and specific problem areas and clear expectations of what is required and by when. APM 50.21 (C-1) provides guidance on what to include. Although we want to separate the connection between a Professional Development Plan and discipline or corrective action, the components of a PDP (expectations, desired outcomes, timelines) are useful with a probation letter.

An employee put on probation must be told that failure to meet the expectations outlined in the probation may result in a notice of contemplated action for dismissal.

Probation is typically the last chance arrangement for an employee failing to meet expectations. Probation periods typically last 90 days but may be ended earlier with language in the probation letter that creates this option. Probation is not required prior to contemplating dismissal.

HR typically does not recommend probation for behavioral issues because they should be corrected immediately or within a short period of time, and then sustained indefinitely.

If you do not intend to or cannot commit to conducting a formal review at each 30 day mark (or sooner), do not consider probation as an option. These reviews are required.

Professional Development Plan (PDP)

The University of Idaho has traditionally used the PDP in connection with discipline. We may have lost some of the perspective that a PDP is really a tool to help an employee succeed – not something designed to complete our documentation requirements prior to further discipline. So, HR encourages the use of a PDP at any point in an employee's job cycle to help establish expectations, goals or a performance and support plan. PDPs can be done for a new employee, annually along with a performance evaluation or at any time that may be necessary, with or without corresponding corrective action.

Maximizing the employee's participation in the PDP process significantly increases the chances of success. As with performance evaluations, the supervisor gets the final word.

Corrective Action – Progressive or Not?

We don't have to follow each of these steps in order. Circumstances occur when it makes sense to skip some steps or combine tools and resources in different ways. Another principle, often applied, is if the same or similar transgression occurs within a reasonable amount of time (typically 6-12 months), it probably does not make sense to issue the same or lesser action as before. It is probably time to step up the corrective action scale.

It is very important to work with your HR Business partner because he or she can help us maintain consistency across the University and comply with employment-related laws and regulations. We strongly recommend including your Business Partner in the discussion right from the verbal warning stage. Another role HR has is to help protect both you and the University by complying with applicable policies, regulations and often, multiple State and Federal laws governing how we treat our employees.

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