Discipline and Documentation, Part IV
By L. Douglas Mault

In this last article in the series, we’ll address the issue of positive confrontations and deal with some problems one can face in administering discipline.

Few owners or managers relish the idea of confronting a problem employee. Yet this can be critical to dealing with a person whose performance and behavior is obstructing the success of a department, a project or even the entire company. So when is confronting an employee valuable and appropriate? When it is constructive and when you want to accomplish any of the following:

- Correct a misunderstanding.
- Encourage actions leading to improved performance.
- Uncover hidden strengths.
- Correct a weakness.
- Correct behavior if the employee has committed an infraction or engaged in misconduct.

The following principles of constructive confrontation will be helpful:

- Wait for the right time, as timing in life is everything; especially wait until the employee has peaked emotionally.
- Don’t treat the employee as an adversary. He’ll only feel hostile and react that way.
- Aim at a win-win attitude and solution.
- Listen carefully until you understand the employee’s point of view, and maybe especially moreso if you are not inclined to agree.
- Describe issues, facts, causes, outcomes, solutions and recommendations, not opinions, rumors, gossip or hearsay.
- Be accurate, complete and professional.
- Establish ground rules for the meeting and the issues, and control both.
- Reach an understanding and agreement.

There can be problems in administering discipline, however. These are pitfalls in professionally handling what is often a delicate and difficult situation, and they must be avoided.

- Failing to get all the specific and relevant facts.
- Flying off the handle, losing one’s temper and acting when not in control of one’s emotions.
- Failing to advise employee of the precise offense and specific details.
- Failing to get the employee’s point of view; believing that your perception of the events is the only correct one and denying the possibility of another point of view.
- Letting the employee talk you out of disciplinary action. If he does, what will you do the next time he commits the same infraction? And perhaps more importantly, what will you do when someone else commits the same infraction?
- Failing to specifically discuss the situation as to what happened, why discipline is called for, why a penalty is being given and what will be the consequences of future infractions.
- Harboring a grudge by holding the infraction against the employee in making future judgments.
- Personalizing the employee’s action as being aimed against yourself.

About the Author
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