

## **Discipline in Organizations**

### **On 'hot stove rules', performance conversations and an opportunity to learn.**

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The October 2008 edition of *Management Today* bemoans the fact that the management of discipline and poor performance in the workplace is not what it was. Under the headline "Death of the Bollocking", a mixture of managerial timidity, increasing bureaucracy, fear of litigation and general societal malaise (death of a competitive ethic etc) are cited as reasons for this.

Its main argument is that people need to know when their performance isn't coming up to scratch and that, as stated in its sign-off paragraph, "... if you want a workplace where you don't have to tick people off in the future, you may need to start bollocking them now."

I agree with much of what's said, especially in relation to the contextual factors mentioned in the article. At the same time, I think it's important for managers to see discipline in a broader sense than simply 'telling people off'.

#### **A focus on objectives, self-discipline and learning**

The word "discipline" has its roots in the Latin word *discere*, which means to learn. And the discipline (especially self-discipline) needed to perform at one's best is at the core of high performance in all fields of activity. So discipline needs to be reframed in managers' thinking. It needs to be seen as contributing to the management of organizational performance 'in the round', not simply as a tool of operational HR aimed at dealing with the poor performance of individuals.

This means shifting the 'centre of gravity' of conversations about discipline, towards a focus on the objectives sought and the standards required in such areas as quality, progress, cost, utility and so on. Where individuals' capabilities, levels of application or behaviours fall short of those required to meet the sought-after performance standards, conversations to explore 'the gap' and possible remedies will arise naturally. This is the case whether the resulting action is aimed at increasing learning or applying some form of sanction.

#### **The hot stove rule**

Many years ago, I came across a very useful way of thinking about how best to achieve effective discipline in organizations. I believe it was first introduced by Douglas McGregor (who is best known for his 'X' and 'Y' Theories of management). McGregor called this approach "the (red) hot stove rule", because it uses the familiar characteristics of a red-hot stove to highlight four guiding principles for practising discipline in organizations. This is usually related to 'disciplinary action' in the more limited sense. However, it works equally well in relation to the wider notion of discipline that I have described above.

The attributes of effective discipline that the metaphor highlights are immediacy, forewarning, consistency and impartiality, as outlined below:

- **Immediacy**

*Characteristic:* If you touch a hot stove, it burns you *immediately*, not some time later.

*Implication for leadership practice:* Conversations about performance should take place immediately after the event that triggers them, not be left until later.

- **Forewarning**

*Characteristic:* As your hand approaches a hot stove, you can feel the heat; so you are *forewarned* that if you touch it you will get burnt.

*Implication for leadership practice:* People must know in advance what performance and behavioural standards are required of them. Performance conversations, and any disciplinary measures that result, will be ineffective and dysfunctional if they appear to have been conjured up out of thin air. A clear link needs to be made to recognised standards and prior warning given that sanctions will be applied if certain conditions either are or are not met.

- **Consistency**

*Characteristic:* Whenever you touch a hot stove, it *always* burns you; it doesn't burn you at some times and not others.

*Implication for leadership practice:* For performance conversations and any resulting actions to be effective, these must take place in a consistent fashion, not in an ad hoc way. If performance shortfalls and/or behavioural issues elicit a response from a manager on some occasions and not on others, this disconnect between words and actions will simply compound the problem.

- **Impartiality**

*Characteristic:* *Whoever* touches the stove will be burnt. It is the act of touching the stove that leads to the painful effect, not some characteristic of the person; and it doesn't burn some people and not others.

*Implication for leadership practice:* Effective and felt-fair performance conversations focus on the act, not the individual. These are also carried out in an impartial way, not based upon personality or position. Performance management, including any disciplinary action, will be ineffective if it appears to be based upon 'one rule for some and another rule for others'.

The above guiding principles help to put "discipline" and "performance management" in their proper places - as aspects of *ongoing, day-to-day* leadership practice. Discipline and performance will never improve if managerial action is limited to periodic set-piece meetings and formal exchanges.

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[http://informalcoalitions.typepad.com/informal\\_coalitions/2008/10/discipline-in-organizations-on-hot-stove-rules-performance-conversations-and-an-opportunity-to-learn.html](http://informalcoalitions.typepad.com/informal_coalitions/2008/10/discipline-in-organizations-on-hot-stove-rules-performance-conversations-and-an-opportunity-to-learn.html)

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