



Oklahoma Conservation Commission

District Directors' Responsibilities:

A 10-Minute Guide Series

This is one in a continuing series of informational/discussion topics designed to help conservation district directors become more informed and knowledgeable about their responsibilities. It is suggested that board members review these guides before a board meeting and then have a ten-minute discussion on them at a meeting.

Guide No. 24 - Progressive Discipline

Oklahoma's Conservation Districts have a long proud history of employing dedicated and hard-working employees. Occasionally though, it is necessary to set a course correction during an employee's tenure. The way this is done is through progressive discipline. While we recognize that conservation district employees are at-will, following routine steps to provide them with due process can make your employment decisions more defensible.

What is Progressive Discipline?

Progressive discipline is an employee disciplinary system that provides a graduated range of responses to employee performance or conduct issues. Disciplinary measures range from mild to severe, depending on the nature and frequency of the problem.

Benefits of Progressive Discipline

Using progressive discipline can help you get employees back on track. Done right, progressive discipline can:

- Allow directors to intervene and correct employee behavior at the first sign of trouble
- Enhance communication between directors and employees
- Help districts achieve higher performance and productivity from their employees
- Improve employee morale and retention by demonstrating that there are rewards for good performance and consequences for poor performance
- Ensure consistency and equity in dealing with employee problems
- Lay the groundwork for fair, legally defensible employment termination for employees who cannot or will not improve

Establishing a Progressive Discipline Policy

Conservation districts should have a discipline policy in place or follow one in practice. And it is not hard to see why: Used properly, progressive discipline gives directors the tools they need to make fair, consistent, and legally defensible disciplinary decisions. Because it's based on communication and collaboration, true progressive discipline also helps employees improve – the ultimate goal of any disciplinary system.

The following steps are normally included in a progressive discipline policy:

(A) Informal counseling is normally the first form of action. This form of action may be administered verbally, as in informal discussion or corrective interview, or in writing, as in a letter of concern. This would be a discussion between the supervisor/manager or board member with the employee. This is used to prevent minor problems from growing into major ones.

No record of this counseling is placed in the personnel file. However, the supervisor/manager will retain documentation of any informal disciplinary action taken in a separate supervision file. This documentation will be cited, as appropriate, in any subsequent formal discipline if used in the decision to administer formal discipline. A copy of any written informal disciplinary action will be provided to the employee.

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(B) Formal counseling takes place if informal counseling fails or other infractions occur. This takes place in an executive session of a board meeting. The employee may be placed on probation for a period of time in which immediate improvements in performance will be expected. Formal counseling is in written form and includes a performance improvement plan that includes:

- Identification of the general nature of the problem
- It is also desirable to provide concrete examples, specific dates and locations of where the problem(s) took place.
- Specific instructions on how the employee can improve performance
- Specific areas of improvement that will be required
- List of actions that the district can do to assist the employee to improve
- Time frame for improvement
- Statement that future action will be taken if the problem(s) continue or job performance does not improve
- Signatures of the employee and district board members. Copy placed in the personnel file
- The district can include in the policy that the document will be removed from personnel files after one year if the employee meets the requirements of the performance improvement plan

(C) Termination of employment is the final option if the above steps do not correct the issue(s).

(D) Follow Up

Remember, the ultimate goal of discipline is to fix the problem and improve the employee's performance. The only way to do this is to check in often on the status of the improvement action plan, and work closely with the employee to ensure a positive outcome.

Progressive discipline is a process, not a single meeting or document. You must start the process at the beginning and see it through to the end.

Current and accurate position description and performance standards for employees are essential in determining if an employee is performing their job duties at the desired level.

Regularly scheduled semi-annual employee performance reviews provide an opportunity to identify and deal with any problems and performance issues. A discussion of issues, employee needs, etc. during these reviews can often prevent problems or misunderstandings.

Additional Resources:

10-Minute Guides 3, 6, & 17

For additional assistance contact the OCC District Services Division.