

How to Address an Employee's Negative Safety Performance in Canada (Without Creating Conflict)



As an OHS manager, your job isn't just about writing policies and running safety meetings—it's about making sure people actually follow them. But what happens when an employee repeatedly ignores safety rules, cuts corners, or puts themselves and others at risk?

Dealing with negative safety performances is tricky. You need to correct unsafe behavior without alienating employees, triggering HR conflicts, or exposing your company to legal risks. So how do you enforce safety while keeping your team engaged and cooperative?

Understanding the Why: Why Do Employees Violate Safety Rules?

Before jumping into discipline, it's important to understand why safety violations happen in the first place. Most employees don't wake up thinking, "*I can't wait to break the safety rules today!*" Instead, their behavior is often influenced by one of the following:

- **Lack of awareness** – They don't fully understand the risks or safety policies.

- **Complacency** – They’ve done the job for years without an incident and assume nothing will go wrong.
- **Time pressure** – They feel rushed and take shortcuts to meet deadlines.
- **Workplace culture** – If leadership or coworkers don’t take safety seriously, individual employees won’t either.
- **Personal factors** – Fatigue, stress, or distractions can make employees less attentive to safety.

Step 1: Start with Coaching, Not Punishment

Jumping straight to discipline can backfire. Employees might get defensive, morale can drop, and you could even risk a grievance if unionized workers feel unfairly targeted. Instead, treat negative safety performance as a coaching opportunity first.

Here’s how:

- **Have a private conversation.** Call the employee aside instead of confronting them in front of others.
- **Describe the unsafe behavior.** Be specific. Instead of saying, *“You’re not following safety procedures,”* say, *“I noticed you weren’t wearing your fall protection when working at heights this morning.”*
- **Ask open-ended questions.** Try, *“Can you walk me through why you chose not to use the safety gear?”* This helps uncover underlying issues.
- **Reinforce expectations.** Remind them of the policy but keep the tone collaborative rather than accusatory.

Step 2: Provide Additional Training and Support

If an employee is struggling with safety performance, they may need more training, not just warnings. Offer refresher courses, hands-on demonstrations, or mentorship from experienced workers.

For example, if an employee isn't properly using personal protective equipment (PPE), don't just tell them to do better—show them exactly how to use it correctly and explain why it matters.

Additionally, review whether your company's safety policies are clear and accessible. If employees aren't following the rules, it might not be just their fault—the training and communication methods could need improvement.

Step 3: Use Progressive Discipline When Necessary

If coaching and training don't work, progressive discipline may be necessary. In Canada, discipline must be reasonable and proportionate to the infraction. A first-time mistake isn't the same as repeated willful violations.

A common approach follows these steps:

1. **Verbal Warning** – A documented conversation where the issue is explained, expectations are reinforced, and the employee is given a chance to improve.
2. **Written Warning** – If unsafe behavior continues, provide a formal written warning detailing the infraction, expectations, and consequences of further violations.
3. **Suspension** – If the employee still doesn't comply, a temporary suspension without pay may be necessary. This should always be done in consultation with HR.
4. **Termination** – As a last resort, if the employee repeatedly puts themselves or others at risk, termination may be necessary. In Canada, dismissal for safety violations must be well-documented and justifiable under employment law.

Step 4: Address Workplace Culture and Leadership

Employees take safety cues from leadership. If supervisors or managers tolerate unsafe behavior or fail to enforce policies consistently, workers will assume safety rules are optional.

Make sure safety expectations apply to *everyone*, including management. If one department consistently overlooks PPE requirements or ignores hazard reports, that needs to be addressed at the leadership level.

Encourage a culture where employees feel comfortable reporting unsafe conditions without fear of retaliation. A worker who doesn't feel safe speaking up about hazards is more likely to cut corners and take risks.

Step 5: Keep Detailed Records

Documentation is your best defense if an employee challenges disciplinary action or if a safety incident leads to legal trouble. Keep records of:

- All safety training sessions attended by the employee.
- Any coaching conversations or warnings given.
- Reports of unsafe behavior and corrective actions taken.
- Witness statements (if applicable).

Having a clear paper trail ensures that if an issue escalates, you can demonstrate that the company acted fairly and responsibly.

Step 6: Recognize and Reinforce Positive Safety Behavior

It's easy to focus only on violations, but reinforcing *good* safety behavior is just as important. When employees follow procedures correctly, acknowledge it. A simple "Great job using your PPE today" goes a long way in reinforcing expectations.

Some companies implement safety incentive programs, offering small rewards or recognition for teams that maintain high safety performance. Just be cautious—avoid incentives that discourage incident reporting, as that can lead to underreporting rather than real improvements.

Final Thoughts: Balancing Accountability and Support

Addressing an employee's negative safety performance is about finding the right balance between enforcement and support. Start with education and coaching, escalate to discipline if necessary, and always ensure that policies are enforced fairly across the organization.

At the end of the day, safety isn't just about following rules—it's about creating an environment where employees *want* to follow them because they understand the risks and value their wellbeing. By taking a proactive, fair, and clear approach, OHS managers in Canada can correct unsafe behavior while maintaining trust and compliance in the workplace.