

Using Safety Training as a Disciplinary Tool—Good or Bad Idea?



When a worker violates your company's safety rules and procedures, say, by not wearing required PPE, you have several options for disciplining him. For example, you can give him a warning, suspend him or even fire him. But would you require him to attend safety training as "punishment" for his infraction?

We recently asked readers if you used safety training as a disciplinary tool. Results:

- 71% said no
- 29% said yes.

We also got some comments. For example, Cathy said, "We do not use safety training as a disciplinary tool, but the Joint Health and Safety committee makes recommendations for training based on the trending of incidents."

Good point, Cathy. For example, a spate of lockout infractions might signal the need for *all* workers to be retrained on the lockout requirements and the importance of complying with them. (Go to the [OHS Insider's Training Compliance Centre](#) for more information on training requirements under the OHS laws. And go to [Safety Smart](#) for tools to help you reinforce training, such as safety talks and quizzes.)

And David wrote us to say, "If you view progressive discipline as an opportunity to modify an employee's behaviour and eventually their attitude, then I believe there is a place for using safety training as a part of their discipline. We should never equate discipline with punishment as the ultimate goal is to help an employee become more effective at our workplace. Sending someone home for three days to 'think about what they did,' rarely produces any real change in that employee. Better that we try and encourage that employee to understand why safe work practices are the way to go. And safety training can play a hugely positive role in those efforts.

For example, if we experience an incident with a forklift operator, putting that operator through some of our in-house forklift training is not a negative approach at all, but rather we use the opportunity to encourage safer work procedures.

Didn't lock out your equipment' Well, serious infractions can result in instant termination, but training can be that step before to ensure that the employee actually knew what they were doing. Training as a form of progressive discipline should always be seen as a positive step towards shaping an employee's outlook on working safely, and never be viewed as something negative."

BC Tribunal Expresses Concern about Training as Punishment

The BC Workers' Compensation Appeals Tribunal echoed David's point about "punishment." A safety officer saw a worker and supervisor on a roof about 24 feet above the ground without their fall protection equipment attached to a lifeline. An inspection of another company worksite revealed two workers on a roof without being connected to lifelines.

The company was penalized for failing to comply with the fall protection requirements and provide adequate training and supervision. The Tribunal ruled that the company hadn't

exercised due diligence.

In criticizing the company's approach to discipline for safety infractions, the Tribunal suggested that the company "consider whether it's appropriate to use formal safety training as a disciplinary tool, as this may be sending the message that having to take a safety course is a punishment, rather than something that should be encouraged or rewarded [[WCAT-2011-02507](#), [2011] CanLII 73943 (BC WCAT), Oct. 6, 2011].

Bottom line: Safety training and discipline may be compatible but the approach you use is critical. As both David and the BC Tribunal note, you don't want workers to see training as a punishment or something to be avoided. Rather, you want them to see training as an opportunity to improve their safe work practices and learn how to protect themselves effectively on the job.