

# Helping Supervisors see “Progressive Discipline” with a Positive Mindset

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**P**rogressive discipline is an area that is often very difficult for supervisors. It is something that many dread, or just avoid. Worse yet, it can sometimes enter into an “I will write you up” mode which is usually destructive for all involved, and certainly doesn’t reflect the style we would want our workers to use with children and families. Conversely, excellent and professionally sound progressive discipline can be an extremely positive vehicle for staff development, will establish and reinforce high practice standards, and help a struggling worker get back on track while improving their performance. Using a progressive discipline process positively can improve overall program morale as others see the supervisor holding the professional standards at a high level. This can help avoid what I refer to as “peer drain” on excellent workers who many times choose to move on from a program because they are frustrated with the level of functioning of their co-workers.

Some basic pre-requisites for an excellent progressive discipline process are:

When the supervisor feels a worker’s behavior may require a disciplinary process they should be in touch with their supervisor and/or Human Resource experts in the agency as soon as possible.

- Ideally, before moving to a process of formal documentation the supervisor will have made a number of attempts at constructive confrontation to collaboratively address the situation with the worker.
- The supervisor should be very clear, and honest, with Human Resources. This would include talking about where they, or the agency, may be at risk if it develops into a more serious mode. For example, personnel evaluations not completed, the behavior has gone on for some time before being addressed, etc. “Trust the experts” as you go forward!
- Especially when frustrated, or disappointed, in the worker the supervisor should be sure to avoid the “I will write you up” mode and focus on a mindset



that sees the process as supportive to the worker and connected to better practice. This is not to suggest that a supervisor should be “soft” or lower practice standards with a worker who is not performing at acceptable levels. There are clearly times when a supervisor should firmly recommend termination of a worker’s employment. It is a crucial supervisory responsibility related to monitoring quality of service to clients. However, in those cases one wants to be sure the process was professionally sound and the worker was given a fair chance to improve. ***The mindset should be seeing progressive discipline as a way to retain a worker and improve their performance, and not as a way to “get rid of people”.***

Jill Shah and I have developed a basic working model for progressive discipline that might serve as a guideline for supervisors if they find themselves in a disciplinary process with a worker. Before implementing these it would be important for the supervisor to check with agency Human Resource experts to be sure they are comfortable with these guidelines.

## **Working Model for Progressive Discipline**

### **1. Identify the behavior that is unacceptable**

The supervisor should identify the behavior that is not acceptable. It should be described in behavioral terms and not in

terms of personality or work habits. It should be described in as measurable a way as possible.

### **2. Identify why the behavior is unacceptable and how it affects service**

The supervisor should be very careful to explain why the behavior is not acceptable framed in what Jill Shah and I have referred to as a “Professional Package” (Delano and Shah, 2009). That is, it is described in relation to a commonly accepted professional standard that is not being met, and not related to the worker’s personality, work habits, attitude, etc. Framing it in a professionally packaged way has many benefits including another opportunity to establish a high standard, credibility with any outside observers of the process, and the willingness of the worker to engage positively in the process. At the very least it allows for a way to see if the worker agrees with the standard, and might provide a “hook” to motivate the worker to improve. Few would want to engage in a process where they feel their personality, integrity, etc. is being challenged, but they may be much more likely to engage in a process to produce a higher professional standard.

### **3. LISTEN to explanation and dialogue how to make it better**

Once the expectations are laid out the supervisor should use their best active listening skills to allow the worker to explain why they believe the behavior is at the level it is and to explore *what the worker believes* would help improve it.

#### 4. Identify the new behavior that is acceptable and why

The supervisor should clarify the new behavior that would be acceptable and explain why this would be important. Early on that may be to produce “better service for clients”, “a better professional image for the worker”, “better able to contribute to the team”, or in the worst case scenario, where the worker has not been engaging well, “to keep your job”. The crucial piece here is that if one is trying to re-direct a behavior then the person asked to change behaviors has to see what is in it for them if they are going to invest in changing.

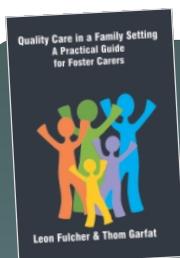
#### 5. Identify resources you will add to help move this forward

This is the most crucial step, and very often the one where progressive discipline comes apart and fails to hold up. A number of crucial things are accomplished by the supervisor assessing and adding specific resources to help the worker achieve the desired progress. First, providing resources accentuates the fairness part of

the process, and is actually a key part of the supervisor’s overall responsibility in regards to staff development. Secondly, if the process does not work and there is a legal process that takes place the provision of resources will be gigantically important to validate the supervisor and agency have met their responsibilities to be fair. Special effort should be given to a collaborative effort between supervisor and worker to identify the most appropriate resources. These might include more training in a specific area, more or adapted supervision sessions, readings, outside consultant coaching, etc. Of course, the most important benefit of added resources is that it may be exactly what the worker needed to improve their performance!

#### 6. Establish clear times to review and evaluate progress

Once a plan is established the supervisor should set up times to review the progress. Be sure to spend just as much, or more, time reviewing the process if the behavior is improving as you would if it was not progressing well. The supervisor



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has a golden opportunity here to reinforce a positive, collaborative process that should strengthen the relationship with the worker.

Progressive discipline should be documented thoroughly, meticulously and respectfully, but should not be about a “write-ups” mode. Excellent and professionally sound progressive discipline can have many “ripple effect” benefits for both the supervisor and agency. If the worker does not engage positively in the process, or cannot improve to the expected level, and has to be asked to leave then the supervisor can at least look in the mirror and say they were fair, supportive and professionally sound in the process. It may also have positive ramifications for other workers who have viewed the process seeing the supervisor and agency as having high standards for practice, yet as fair and ethically sound in holding those standards high. If the worker does engage well, takes advantage of the process, and gets back on track they will be grateful for the support and that may be a foundation to improve the supervisory relationship. Other workers can assume that if they are struggling one day, they will be treated in a similar manner with support and respect to help them improve. Professionally sound progressive discipline is a win-win for all, and should be viewed as a key staff development tool by the supervisor and the agency.

## Reference

Delano, F. and Shah, J. Defining supervision in a professionally packaged way, *Relational Child and Youth Care Practice*, Volume 22, Issue 1, Spring, 2009

*For readers who want more information on progressive discipline they can also see Floyd Alwon's work from his Effective Supervisory Practice series.*

For more on how to link constructive confrontation to progressive discipline readers can refer to Using the “Professional Package” to Help Supervisors Enhance Cultural Sensitivity When Confronting, *Journal of Relational Child and Youth Care*, Volume 20, Issue 1 Spring, 2007.

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