



University of Idaho  
Human Resources

# Mentoring, Coaching and Corrective Action Guidelines

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## Introduction

The following coaching and corrective action guidelines are intended to guide supervisors in helping University of Idaho staff succeed at their jobs. Faculty processes

differ and we encourage you to contact the Office of the Provost and consult the Faculty-Staff Handbook for more information about managing faculty.

[FSH 3190 Diminished Performance of Employees](#) touches on our collective desire to, when appropriate, recognize performance issues and do what we can to help an employee turn them around. We value our staff and invest in them heavily through the initial training periods and beyond. It makes good sense to give employees an opportunity to improve performance deficiencies or change behavioral related problems to help them succeed at the University of Idaho.

Most performance or behavioral issues can be corrected. Providing an employee with the opportunity to correct issues as soon as they are identified is a key competency of a good supervisor. Not addressing performance or behavioral issues usually does our community and the employee a disservice and may put the university at risk.

There are situations in which an employee's actions require more aggressive disciplinary action up to dismissal. [FSH 3920 Dismissal and Discipline of Exempt Employees](#) and [Discipline and FSH 3930 Separation of Classified Employees](#) outline or otherwise discuss "adequate cause" for discipline or dismissal and the required due process steps associated with these actions.

Human Resources is always available to assist supervisors with employee issues. We strongly recommend that supervisors work with an HR Business Partner right from the verbal warning stage to ensure that we maintain consistency with practices across the university and comply with all applicable employment-related laws and regulations.

## Identifying Problematic Behaviors

The first step in any coaching or corrective action is to determine the facts of the situation and clearly identify the problematic behavior(s).

### Fact Finding

Before undertaking corrective action, a supervisor should establish the facts. For example, what performance expectations are not being met? What happened at the event in question? What is the employee's perspective or reasoning? How do we know the employee knew about the expectations? How have you handled similar situations in the past?

The risk of taking only one side of a story or extrapolating from a minimum of established facts is that we can jump to the wrong conclusion – a conclusion that would

have been different if we simply asked a few questions. Employees appreciate this effort and fairness and are more likely to respond to corrective action if a supervisor takes the time to ask for their perspective.

HR Business Partners are available to assist with fact-finding and participate in meetings with the supervisor and employee. HR's participation in the meetings is strongly encouraged if the potential outcome of the fact-finding is a letter of reprimand or higher-level discipline.

## Performance Issues versus Behavioral Issues

Performance or work-related issues are those that directly affect the employee's work (or lack of work) including meeting deadlines, productivity, quality of work, quantity of work, accuracy, attention to detail, timeliness and other measurable results. Behavioral issues include attendance, absenteeism and tardiness, as long as the absences or tardiness are not otherwise protected by law.

Although behavioral issues usually contribute to performance problems, they can be identified separately and as a subset of work performance. Work performance often takes time to improve and to measure. In many cases, behavioral issues can be corrected immediately by an employee if they choose. Because behavioral issues can be corrected much more quickly, HR does not recommend probation or a Professional Development Plan (PDP) for behavioral issues alone.

## Three Corrective Categories

### 1. Coaching and Mentoring

Tools available at this step include a Verbal Warning, usually summarized in a Summary of Meeting or a Performance Development Plan. This stage also offers the opportunity to evaluate what additional training, coaching or mentoring an employee may need to be successful.

### 2. Corrective Action

Corrective action typically includes a Letter of Warning or a Letter of Reprimand. Templates for these letters are available from your HR Business Partner. When warranted, Performance-Related Probation for a period between 30 and 90 days may be appropriate. Probation requires the supervisor to provide clear direction on improvements expected from the employee, either through a Professional Development

Plan or some other means. These corrective actions are generally used for employees outside of their probationary period.

### 3. Discipline

Discipline may include suspension without pay, involuntary demotion, involuntary transfer, revocation of driving privileges, disciplinary reduction in pay (temporarily or permanently) or termination. Our due process system requires us to provide adequate notice to an employee through a Notice of Contemplated Action, which gives the employee an opportunity to respond prior to the application of any discipline. Discipline or a Notice of Contemplated Action usually follows either an act or omission that falls within the interpretation of adequate cause or after unsuccessful efforts by the department to help an employee improve or correct their work performance.

## Coaching and Mentoring Options

### Verbal Warning

Also called verbal counseling, a verbal warning is a conversation that informally provides guidance to an employee, who will usually perceive it as less threatening than other corrective actions. Documentation is crucial: HR recommends either summarizing the verbal warning meeting in a written Summary of Meeting and providing a copy to the employee, or documenting the action/behavior observed, what was said in the verbal warning and dates and times of both. The documentation should be kept in the supervisor's file for the employee.

### Letter of Expectations

A letter of expectations is a constructive tool that can be used to outline and clarify expectations to improve performance. This letter should not be seen or perceived as discipline. To assist in determining if this step would be appropriate, please work with an HR Business Partner.

### Professional Development Plan (PDP)

While a PDP may at first seem like a disciplinary action, it is really a tool to help an employee succeed. HR encourages the use of a PDP at any point in an employee's job cycle to help establish expectations, goals or a performance and support plan. PDPs can be done for a new employee, annually along with a performance evaluation, or at any

time that may be helpful—with or without corresponding corrective action. Maximizing the employee's participation in the PDP process significantly increases the chances of success. As with performance evaluations, the supervisor gets the final word.

## Corrective Action Options

### Letter of Warning

A letter of warning is a step that generally falls after the use of coaching and mentoring options outlined above. A supervisor is not obligated to issue a letter of warning before a letter of reprimand. They can choose the most appropriate level depending on the performance issue and individual circumstances. A letter of warning can be used to address work performance or behavioral-related reasons.

### Letter of Reprimand

A letter of reprimand may be the last step before discipline. Reprimands can be accompanied by a Professional Development Plan.

Some supervisors are wary of jumping to a reprimand, often worrying about angering the employee or making the situation worse. If we recall that the purpose of corrective action is to help the employee succeed, also helping those around the employee, then a clear, definitive and serious step like this can be a great tool to get an employee's attention and help them understand their employment could be at risk. HR rarely advises administering a letter of reprimand twice for the same or similar issue.

## Disciplinary Options

### Probation

#### Entrance Probation versus Performance-Related Probation

Classified staff serve a six-month entrance probation period, both to give the university a chance to evaluate that employee's likelihood of success and to give the employee a chance to determine if they are in the right job. It is very important for supervisors to provide clear expectations, guidance and training, and be available to help the employee learn the job. Sometimes, even when we do this, we discover that the employee is just not meeting our expectations. We encourage supervisors to provide frequent counseling, advise and verbal warnings to an entrance probation employee and to document those

discussions. HR does not recommend a letter of warning, reprimand or other discipline short of termination for an employee on entrance probation.

In some unique circumstances, entrance probation can be extended. Because this extends an employee's ability to become certified in a position, we should only use it in limited circumstances – usually when an employee has not had the opportunity to receive sufficient training for a position. Such situations may include:

- The employee missed a month or more of work due to illness or other approved reason.
- Employee training was unavailable and additional training and time will likely lead to the employee successfully passing probation (Note: a supervisor's failure to ensure available training was delivered does not count).
- The job is so technically complex that any individual in the job deserves additional time for the supervisor to be able to evaluate performance (Note: this assumes the supervisor has been working closely with and evaluating the employee's performance along the way and has the documentation to back it up)

Entrance probation should not be extended because a supervisor failed to adequately supervise or review and evaluate the employee's work during this period. If it becomes clear that the employee is not likely to succeed, it does both the employee and the university a service to end that relationship. Do not wait until the sixth month because processing and notice time require us to make the determination by about the five-month mark.

### Performance Related Probation

Performance-related probation, or “probation” as it is more commonly referred to, is typically a 90-day period with formal reviews at 30, 60 and 90 days. The length may be less than 90 days (the length can be stated in the probation letter). It typically is used when an employee needs a reasonable period of time to correct a work performance issue and prove it through measurable criteria. This type of probation should come with clearly identified and specific problem areas and clear expectations of what is required and by when. [APM 50.21](#) (C-1) provides guidance on what to include.

Probation is typically the last chance arrangement for an employee failing to meet expectations. An employee put on probation must be told that failure to meet the expectations outlined in the probation may result in a notice of contemplated action for dismissal. Probation is not required prior to contemplating dismissal.

HR typically does not recommend probation for behavioral issues because they should be corrected immediately or within a short period of time, and then sustained indefinitely.

If a supervisor does not intend to or cannot commit to conducting a formal review at each 30-day mark (or sooner), do not consider probation as an option. These reviews are required.

## Notice of Contemplated Action

The university uses a Notice of Contemplated Action form/process to give an employee who is facing disciplinary action an opportunity to respond to the contemplated action before it goes into effect. This process must be coordinated through HR and the General Counsel's office. Although the outcome is often dismissal, it doesn't have to be. Sometimes things are learned through due process that prompt the university to take an action different from what was contemplated or even no action at all.

## Corrective Action – Progressive or Not?

It isn't necessary to follow each of these steps in order. Circumstances occur when it makes sense to skip some steps or combine tools and resources in different ways. If the same or similar issue occurs within a reasonable amount of time (typically 6-12 months), it likely does not make sense to issue the same or lesser action as before. It is likely time to step up the corrective action scale.