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## Dealing One-on-One When Things Go Wrong

Communications in response to performance problems touch agricultural business owners, workers, and public officials for more than the moment. They have cumulative and long-lasting effects on relationships. Within the framework of a disciplinary policy or guide chart, there remain choices of approach in handling a problem incident. Below are definitions, examples, and some pros and cons of immediate responses seen in agricultural firms. Video clips of personnel problem incidents and different responses to them can be viewed at [AgHelpWanted.org](http://AgHelpWanted.org).

### Types of Responses

How many responses can you have to the milker arriving late, the field man asleep in the supply room, the general laborer refusing a work assignment, the irrigator smelling like a brewery, two coworkers loudly arguing with each other, the forklift operator who thinks she is in a chariot race, the foreman extracting personal favors from crew members, and the feeder moving with all the speed of a brain surgeon? At least these nine:

1. **Penalty imposition:** Unilateral administration of a punishment—typically a loss of earnings opportunity, status, or comfort. Supervisor lays it on a worker.

Examples: “You are suspended for 3 workdays.”

“I’m taking you off of the forklift for good.”

(And the ever popular) “You’re fired!”

A *penalty* makes clear to an offender that certain behavior is frowned upon, and it sends to others a strong message about standards. In strictest form, it removes from the workplace a person who caused a problem and could do so again. On the other hand, it may alienate or eliminate an employee whose past and future contributions to the farm outweigh the trouble he or she generates. Replacing fired workers takes time and expense, and decisions to penalize expose employers to legal challenge.

2. **Specific Warning:** Advance notice that a penalty will be administered if an unacceptable behavior continues or recurs. Written form may be construed as a kind of penalty.

Examples: “Here is a formal notice that I won’t put up with your waltzing in late anymore. Next time you don’t show up on time without calling ahead and having a good reason, you will be suspended.”

“If you can’t keep up with the other pruners, I will put you on the rock moving crew.”

“If I see you harassing Jose again, I’m going to have you fired.”