

UPDATE

CODE OF CONDUCT What is It, Who Needs One?

No one told me I couldn't steal from my fellow employees," complained the ranch hand discovered with a cache of items taken from other workers. Many of those individuals had complained that they had misplaced one or two items over the past several weeks. None would have suspected the easy-going, likeable new cow boss. One who came with good references and a decade of combined experience at other reputable operations in the county. She had seemed like a good hire.

In general, you should only hire people that you believe know right from wrong. However, as a manager it is important to communicate your expectations regarding worker behavior as well. No one would take on a new hired hand and expect they could perform their duties without some instruction about the work that needed done. It is just as important to communicate to them the boundaries within which you expect them to achieve it.

What is a Code of Conduct?

A Code of Conduct is a document that provides a summary of the most important policies for a workplace. It should address the various categories of worker employment. It is a document that is used to promote understanding and consistency within a business. It provides a list of expectations for all workers. It may be incorporated into a handbook or issued separately, but having written rules about behavioral standards informs employees and supports disciplinary action if necessary.

It is best when adding a new worker to have them agree to follow your Code of Conduct. This Code should serve as the foundation for how workers behave towards one another both during and outside of the workplace. A solid framework can help to safeguard relationships in times of difficulty and it can help individuals understand what commitment is expected of workers. Discussions around the Code of Conduct and its expectations when onboarding new workers can be used to restate what is expected. Management should make clear what procedures will be followed when dealing with a breach of the Code, as well as who will enforce the Code. Ideally, all workers will sign a copy of the Code of Conduct before beginning their employment.

One day last summer a milker arrived at his job 40 minutes late. Other employees in his parlor crew were well into their work. The herdsman noticed this latecomer but said nothing to him, continuing instead to chat with one of the others and pat the animals as they walked by. On a nearby dairy, another milker came about 30 minutes after the scheduled starting time. His supervisor immediately gave him a written warning. At a third operation in the same county that day, the herdsman who supervised a similarly late milker approached him and explained why it was important for the whole crew to be punctual.



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Benefits of a Code of Conduct

With or without a Code of Conduct, agricultural managers find that all kinds of things happen. Late arrival, absenteeism, intoxication on the job, slow or sloppy work, insubordination, theft, and conflicts among employees raise concerns, tempers, and expenses. In addition, if an employee engages in behavior that lands your business in legal hot water, having a Code of Conduct in place can help with regulators or prosecutors. On the other hand, without a Code of Conduct could expose the business to greater liability.

Nearly every type of mistake and misconduct can eat away at the bottom line. The cost can be particularly large around more capital-intensive and technologically advanced operations. Where equipment is faster, chemicals more powerful, or loads larger, each worker on average affects a greater amount of product. Sloppy picking, pruning, or sorting by a field crew member may mess up a relatively small portion of output, but a mistake in mixing chemicals, controlling temperature and humidity, or adjusting machine clearances can damage thousands of plants or animals.

Skilled personnel management can reduce the incidence of problems but cannot be counted on to prevent them all. No matter how carefully managers attend to job design, employee selection, orientation and training, performance management, and pay, things do go wrong from time to time. Preventable or not, worker performance shortcomings and misconduct call for a response. Dealing with problems when they occur is an important part of management, especially at the first-line supervisory level.

There are different ways to respond to lateness—or any other incident of employees not meeting reasonable expectations, as the example of the three dairy supervisors found on the first page demonstrates. Whatever the managers communicate affects not only the situation at hand, but also longer-term relationships with workers, including those not immediately involved. Communication can also generate additional costs or benefits, but either way a formal policy can help.

What is in a Code of Conduct?

A Code of Conduct is often included as a separate chapter or section of a broader set of Written Policies. Such a document might also provide other important guidance for conducting your business, for example: a mission statement, strategic goals, business charter, and similar information. Other businesses develop a Code of Conduct guide with the goal of distributing a copy to each employee. When circulated as a stand-alone document, the guide might also include a code of ethics or other guidance for employee conduct.



Employee Conduct and Work Rules

To ensure orderly operations and provide the best possible work environment, the management of this farm expects employees to conduct themselves in a manner that protects the interests and safety of all persons here, as well as the farm in general.

It is not possible to list all the forms of behavior that would violate this general standard and be considered unacceptable in our operation. The following are examples of conduct that may result in disciplinary action, including formal warning, suspension, and termination of employment:

- Theft or inappropriate removal or use of company property
- Falsification of time or production records
- Working under the influence of alcohol or illegal drugs
- Possession, distribution, sale, transfer, or use of alcohol or illegal drugs in the workplace, while on duty, or while operating employer-owned vehicles or equipment
- Fighting or threatening violence in the workplace
- Negligence or improper conduct leading to damage of employer-owned property
- Insubordination or other disrespectful conduct
- Violation of safety or health rules
- Sexual or other unlawful harassment
- Unauthorized absence from ranch during the workday
- Unsatisfactory performance or work output



When developing a Code of Conduct keep these best practices in mind;

- Avoid technical language or jargon.
- Carefully think over all the details that should be covered. Make sure each area and situation is addressed.
- Make it comprehensive. Try to answer all the questions that might arise.
- Make it accessible by all the workers in your business, including managers.

Some of the topics that a Code of Conduct should address:

- Respect others
- Treat others fairly
- Communication that is professional, open, and honest
- Guidance for conflict resolution, who to go to, where to report, what to expect
- Endangering self or others
- Absenteeism

- Misrepresentations (e.g., lying to supervisor, falsifying documents)
- Theft
- Misuse of chemicals and equipment
- Fighting, bullying, harassment, abuse of others
- Drugs, alcohol use, and substance abuse
- Smoking on the job
- Non-work activities during work hours (e.g., personal business, reading)
- Leaving the workplace without notification or permission
- Sleeping on the job
- Starting time, quitting time, arriving late

Suppose a young, brash, tractor driver has been complaining every day to an absolutely crackerjack mechanic about some clank in his engine that he says the mechanic should have fixed. Frustration leads to ego involvement and insults, until finally the mechanic loses his cool and actually takes a poke at the driver. The policy is to terminate people for fighting. Would you fire him?



What to Do When Conduct Goes Wrong?

Several decisions affect whether capable people are attracted to work in a farm or ranch business, whether they stay, and how well they perform. Skilled personnel management can reduce the incidence of problems but will not prevent them all. No matter how carefully managers attend to job design, employee selection, orientation and training, performance management, and pay, things do go wrong from time to time. Dealing with problems when they occur is a key function of the first-line supervisor and has great significance for higher level managers.

Especially because no single type of response is best or worst for all occasions, it is useful to distinguish among several ways of handling a problem incident. Below are definitions of response types seen on farms. How many approaches 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 co-workers loudly at odds 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?

There are at least nine possible responses:

1. **Penalty:** Imposition of a punishment, typically a loss of status, comfort, or earnings opportunity. Supervisor lays it on the worker.
2. **Specific Warning:** Advance notice that a penalty will be administered if an unacceptable behavior continues or recurs. Written form may itself be construed as a penalty.
3. **Vague Threat:** Expression of intent to inflict penalty of an unspecified nature, usually conditioned on future unacceptable behavior, which also may be described imprecisely.
4. **Authority Emphasis:** Statement of a rule or directive as legitimate and proper. Implication is that failure to obey violates the organization. It often carries an implied warning.
5. **Avoidance:** Disconnection from an event so as to be unaffected by it. Common forms include pretending ignorance, seeking distraction, and simply not acting on the obvious.
6. **Humoring:** Coaxing with amusement, flattery, sarcasm, obvious exaggeration or insincerity, or ludicrous talk. Taken literally, it may resemble any of the other types.
7. **Explanation:** Provision of information that clarifies what the supervisor wants or why. It may consist of facts, reasoning, or know-how. An “irrational” variant can resemble humoring.

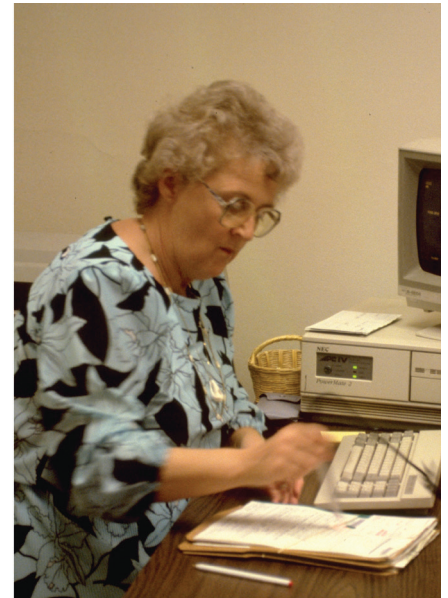


8. **Appeal to Interests or Values:** Justification of desired behavior as consistent with worker's own welfare or beliefs. Offering of a reward--material, social, or spiritual--contingent on future performance constitutes the "quid pro quo" form.
9. **Problem Solving:** Presentation of an undesirable behavior or condition as a problem to be jointly solved. Usually by opening with a question, supervisor engages worker in discussion of the problem and search for a solution. It often includes or leads to some explanation, in both directions.

The nine types are outlined as if they were distinct from one another for clarity. In practice, of course, they are often used in combination--explanation with humor, for example, or authority with warning. Obviously, this typology is not the only way of sorting out immediate responses to incidents on the farm. Another scheme characterizes leadership by six "styles" -- coercive, authoritative, affiliative, democratic, pacesetter, and coaching -- that one can reflected in the range of response types presented here.

Regardless of the classification system used, there are many alternatives and none of them is the best way to deal with all problems. What works well in one situation may only aggravate the trouble in another. The dismissal of an apparently intoxicated irrigator can lead to increased respect, a lawsuit, both, or anything in between. An explanation about how more careful pruning affects business volume can develop understanding and loyalty or disdain and resentment. Each type of response has its potential advantages, disadvantages, and place in the supervisor's repertoire. Where a few of them are used heavily and others not at all, supervisors may be failing to accurately diagnose and handle incidents that occur.

A collection of video clips is posted with the online version of Ag Help Wanted. The set of nine vignettes that illustrate approaches to one-on-one communication in problem situations can be viewed at the link noted under Resources below. The nine approaches are the same as those that appear in the list above. Each set of vignettes includes one scene showing an apparent personnel problem and at least three scenes showing different supervisory responses to it. The problem work situations include: tardiness, slow work, inebriation, poor quality work, theft, conflict between workers, insubordination, sleeping on the job, and careless work. Taken together, the responses form a typology of nine approaches.



AG HELP WANTED

Ag Help Wanted: Guidelines for Managing Agricultural Labor is an educational guidebook designed to assist every person who currently manages or expects to manage human resources on farms, ranches, nurseries, dairies, and other agricultural operations. The text includes chapters covering:

- Communication and Problem Solving | Communicating the Employment Contract;
- Communication and Problem Solving | Policies and Employee Handbooks;
- Communication and Problem Solving | Policies to Guide Disciplinary Action; and
- Communication and Problem Solving | Dealing One-on-One When Things Go Wrong.

RESOURCES:

AG HELP WANTED: Guidelines for Managing Agricultural Labor | Chapter 6: Standards, Correction, and Discipline.

<https://AgHelpWanted.org> (accessed May, 2021).

Draft clauses for a dairy code of conduct. Department of Agriculture, Water and the Environment. Australian Government.

<https://haveyoursay.awe.gov.au/40871/widgets/265665/documents/96088> (accessed May, 2021).

Owen, L. and W. Howard, et al. Section 3: Bringing Formalized Management to Your Farm Business-Written Policies | Code of Conduct. Managing the Multi-Generational Family Farm. Canadian Farm Business Management Council. 1997.

Problem Work Situations and Nine Possible Responses. Video vignettes.

Located at AgHelpWanted.org: <https://aghelpwanted.org/Videos.htm>. (accessed May, 2021).

Sample Employee Code of Conduct Policy.

<https://resources.workable.com/employee-code-of-conduct-company-policy> (accessed May, 2021).

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