



THE UNIVERSITY OF GEORGIA  
**COOPERATIVE EXTENSION**  
Colleges of Agricultural and Environmental Sciences & Family and Consumer Sciences

## PROGRESSIVE DISCIPLINE

Most situations in which formal disciplinary action is needed **can usually be prevented** by proper employee selection, clear and adequate instructions (including job descriptions and policies), periodic observation and communication, and appropriate recognition.

Sometimes, however, even after earnest efforts at corrective instruction, some employees will still violate established rules and standards. In such cases the prompt application of appropriate disciplinary measures is an imperative and inescapable obligation of the manager.

Since discipline is a periodic necessity within a large organization such as Cooperative Extension, then, the importance of establishing and adhering to disciplinary policies and procedures that are **fair, prompt, and legally sufficient** cannot be emphasized too strongly. This is dictated not only by common ethics, but also by the University of Georgia, Board of Regents, State Attorney General's Offices and state and federal laws which require that the more severe forms of discipline comport with the due process.

The requisites of fairness, promptness, and legal sufficiency can usually be satisfied by the disciplinary process known as "progressive discipline." It is this process that should be the hallmark of disciplinary practices throughout Cooperative Extension. And it is this process that is the standard by which disciplinary actions are judged when appealed to the various personnel boards.

Simply stated, **progressive discipline means that discipline is applied in several stages of severity, culminating if necessary in dismissal.** The usual sequence is oral reprimand, written warning, suspension (without pay), and **dismissal.** Each stage, therefore, moves closer to termination and each one in turn is designed to stimulate a change in the behavior that activated the disciplinary process. Moreover, **the staging is so timed that the employee has the opportunity to correct his/her behavior prior to the next stage. The goal is to apply the minimum level of discipline that will bring the employee's performance up to the expected level.**

There are several types of progressively severe disciplinary actions that are recognized or permissible by University of Georgia Cooperative Extension. In general order of severity they are:

1. Oral reprimand
2. Written warning
3. Suspension without pay
4. Suspension with pay (for Dean and Director's use only)
5. Dismissal

Oral reprimands and written warnings are warning procedures and are the least harsh of the several types of disciplinary actions. They are usually the first two steps in the progressive discipline sequence. When properly documented they provide evidence that the manager has observed a progressive sequence if a more severe form of discipline is applied in a subsequent violation

The **oral reprimand** may be utilized as a management tool by a manager at any level, i.e., coordinating agent (EFNEP), County Extension Coordinator, Lab Supervisor, Specialist, Extension Program Leader, etc. The **written warning** should be used by middle management (District Extension Director, Extension Program Leader, etc.) or by a member of management so delegated by middle management.

Any written counseling should include a statement that offers the employee an opportunity to further address an issue. Example: "I will welcome the opportunity for you to meet with me so that we may continue to work at resolving any workplace concerns that you might have. In addition, you may discuss this action with (name & title of next level of mgmt)."

In discipline actions involving suspension or termination of classified employees, the written notice of suspension or termination must include the following statement:

If you wish to appeal this (suspension/termination), you should contact (name of next level of management, usually the department head, DED, etc.) at (phone # and/or address) within 5 business days of receipt of this letter, in accordance with the University grievance procedure, as outlined in the University's Administrative Policies and Procedures. If you have questions about the appeal process you may contact the CAES Employee Relations Coordinator at 706-542-8575.

**Note:** All written disciplinary documents given to an employee should have a place for the employee to sign as an acknowledgement that the employee has read the document. For example:

I have read the above. My signature does not necessarily represent agreement with this action.

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Signature

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Date

All oral reprimands should be documented in the employee's productivity file. A copy of the written warning should be filed in the employee's personnel file held by the Associate Dean for Extension or District Extension Director.

The more severe types of discipline – **suspension** and **dismissal** – are all subject to specific procedural requirements. The importance of adhering to the procedures cannot be stressed too strongly as a deficiency in any respect may result in the action being reversed on appeals. These discipline measures are utilized by the Associate Dean or District Extension Director.

There may be exceptions to the process. Specifically, there are occasions when an employee must be removed from the job without delay. This includes such circumstances as when it is likely that the employee has committed a felony or other crime involving moral turpitude, or when his/her continued presence on the job might endanger the employee or others or be unduly disruptive to the operations. In such instances, this emergency discipline measure is known as "suspension-with-pay" and is administered by the Dean and Director or another manager so delegated by the Dean and Director.

The objective of the disciplinary process is not to get rid of an employee but rather to get his/her attention and thus bring his/her performance up to the expected level. The application of the process in all its stages should be characterized by fairness, promptness, and legal sufficiency. Again, these requisites can usually be satisfied by establishing and adhering to a policy of progressive discipline.

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