

# Just Discipline

By Mike Blevins



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*In the second of a three-part series, Mike discusses the misconceptions about discipline in this article and how discipline is an integral part of creating a Just Culture. Discipline is often associated with punishment, and Mike explains why this leads to performance and people problems.*

Does discipline fit into a Just Culture? I am convinced it is an element of a Just Culture.

When I was in school, I never really learned to appreciate the study of English. I was fine with vocabulary and grammar but the rest of it failed to excite me. In fact, part of the reason that I am an electrical engineer rather than mechanical is that EEs only had to take nine hours of English and MEs had to take 12 hours where I attended college. It wasn't until later in life that I realized

that those teachers had more going on than I realized. Words usually mean what the word



means. I think we have overcomplicated the meaning of words. Often if we will just focus on the word itself we can understand what it means.

The word *discipline* as we use it today is synonymous with punishment. Just saying the word can gather a crowd of union stewards, HR representatives and lawyers. It can immediately evoke feelings of anger and defensiveness from those being “disciplined.” We brag about how our parents disciplined us and how “kids today” don’t get enough discipline like it is a right of passage into adulthood.



## Discipline ≈ Punishment

I can’t tell you the number of times I felt like I had to defend a decision our leadership team made about discipline to senior management, even the board of directors. There is significant pressure on management to appear “tough” on people who cause us corporate pain, yes, pain. Often it seems we are more interested in getting even than in finding out what happened, who was involved, and how we should improve the system. In fact, I call stereotypical discipline “corporate revenge.”

The effect of blaming someone wrongly and then punishing him or her unjustly is easily

described with Daniels’<sup>1</sup> model explained in the first article of this series. Remember the negative immediate consequences? If people get something they don’t want, it is considered punishment and the behavior diminishes. Often that doesn’t mean they stop doing what they did, it just means you don’t find out about it when things go wrong. The organization is worse off because the same bad things are happening, but now, no one gets a chance to figure out why.

Discipline is one of the most misunderstood, misused words in our language. Even saying the word brings fear to most people, especially children. But in looking at the original meaning of the word, it brings quite another meaning, and perhaps a different reaction.

**Discipline is  
to make a disciple**

Making a disciple is best done by training, not by punishment. In fact, the expounded version of the definition says: ***Discipline** – systematic instruction given to disciples to train them as students in a craft or trade, or any other activity which they are supposed to perform, or to follow a particular code of conduct.*(Wiki)

The word-ology goes on to say that modern society has reduced the concept of discipline to include only punishment. I like the original intent of the word. Daniels would remind us here that there are four ways to change behavior: R+, R-, P+ and P-. Note that punishment is one of those methods, but only one.

Let’s dissect the concept of training to see how it fits into the four. If you assume someone wants to know how to do something the correct way then they will want to be trained to do it. If they

<sup>1</sup> Aubrey Daniels – see [www.aubreydaniels.com](http://www.aubreydaniels.com)

are trained and perform the task incorrectly they get something they don't want. It actually is a self-induced punishment. If a leader, corrects them in a constructive way such that they learn



what they did wrong and how to improve, then the chances of success are greater. If they then perform the task right, they get what they want and it is self-reinforcing in a positive way. This is the best kind of positive reinforcement because it is intrinsic and doesn't rely on someone else to give them consequences.

Research tells us most people want to come to work to do a good job. Therefore, if they do a good job and know it, they get what they want. So, discipline (training) that is positively reinforcing gives the individual what he or she wants and the organization the results it wants, a win-win. If

the organization delivers undeserved punishment it is ruled as unjust and diminishes the behavior, which may have been incorrect, but it also diminishes the will to continue learning. The kind of teaching discipline that we have been talking about is Constructive Discipline because, done properly in the spirit of teaching, it builds the learner and the organization up. The term *constructive* comes from Tosan's<sup>2</sup> work. If you can buy that concept then this next statement won't be too big a leap for you.

**People expect to be and want to be disciplined in a Just Culture.**

We have to explore accountability to understand why this is true. In the last article in this series, I will discuss another one of the most misunderstood and over-used phrases in organizations today..."Holding people accountable."

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<sup>2</sup>Tosan, Inc – see [www.tosaninc.com](http://www.tosaninc.com)