

Alternatives to Discipline – Formal and Informal Recognition Options

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How Your Leaders Use Formal and Informal Recognition at Work?

Positive, formal and informal recognition are great discipline alternatives. How do your leaders practice POSITIVE rule enforcement each day?

This article builds on a past article that provided [four steps to effective rule enforcement](#). In that foundational article, I focused on the need for clear, well-communicated rules that are consistently enforced with primarily positive, and in some cases, negative consequences.

In this article, I look at how effective formal and informal recognition approaches serve as great discipline alternatives.

What is the Difference Between Enforcement and Discipline?

People often treat discipline and enforcement as synonyms. They see the two terms as meaning the same thing. Such use tends to make people believe that enforcement is always negative.

The dictionary definition of enforcement has no negative tone to it at all. Enforcement merely means ‘ensure that people follow the rules.’

"The first step on the road to high performance begins with a choice."

Unfortunately, too many of us have only seen negative forms of enforcement on display in either our work lives or our home life. 'Spare the rod, spoil the child' was an accepted adage back in the day.

Some of the most famous coaches in the sports world are known for their explosive, and assumedly effective, negative natures. Even the television bosses we remember from the past are known for their angry nature. Do the names Slate, Mooney, Drysdale, or Tate sound familiar to any of you readers?

How Effective is Discipline as a Workplace Rule Enforcement Strategy?

Discipline seems effective because it is a tangible action that involves some level of negative consequence – punishment, if you will.

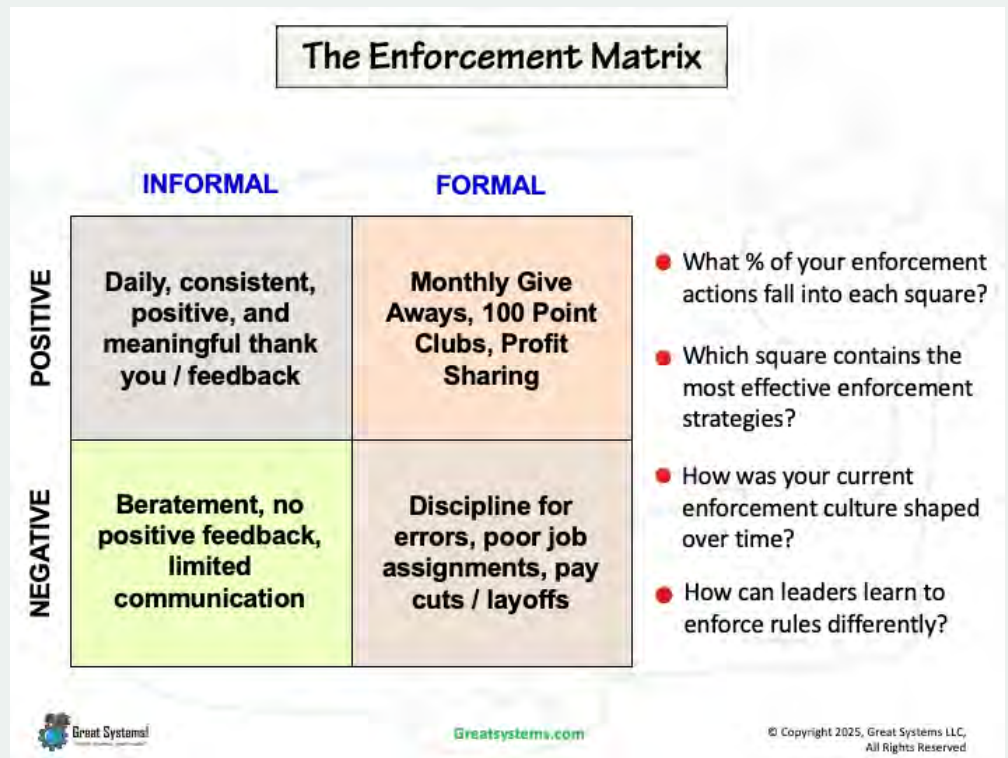
Unfortunately, if people know they will be punished if they are caught breaking a rule, what do you think happens?

People develop their own techniques to avoid detection, but they still most likely break certain rules. People push problems underground as people hide errors that might get them in trouble.

The act of discipline itself often damages relationships and reputations.

The organization should not tolerate poor performance, especially on the part of leaders. Actions we take to address poor performance should however have a positive, coach-focus, if possible.

All too often, poor performance is the result of poorly defined expectations, weak process-based measures, and the lack of daily, consistent, positive, and meaningful performance feedback and support. Discipline is not an effective rule enforcement strategy.

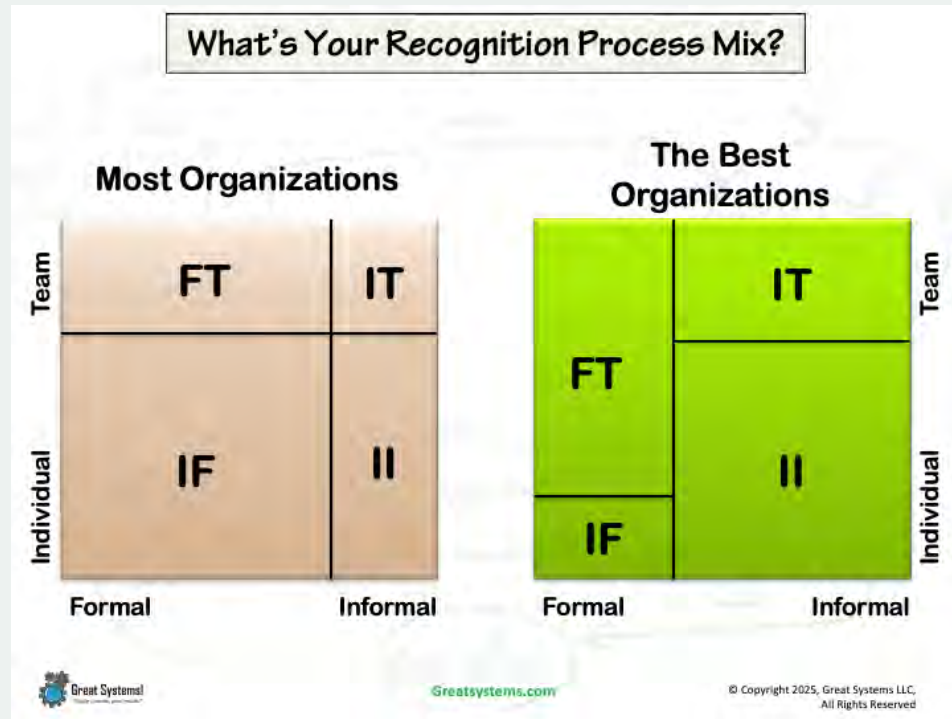


How Do You Use Informal and Formal Recognition as Discipline Alternatives?

I created the Rule Enforcement Matrix (shown above) to help leaders two ways. First, this tool helps better define current enforcement approaches.

Second, its use helps create a more effective plan for future rule enforcement at work. It is easy to use the Rule Enforcement Matrix.

First, ask your leaders to place a percentage in each of the four quadrants. The four percentages should total 100%.



Then, have a dialogue about where areas of consistency and inconsistency exist across work groups and rule types. Finally, create an action plan to address the areas of inconsistency that exist.

High performance organizations place their lowest percentages in the formal and informal negative discipline quadrants. In many cases, such organizations use informal discipline less often than they do formal discipline.

In both cases, I estimate that neither negative approach is in use more than 5% of the time. Leaders place the most focus on informal, positive enforcement. These daily actions need to be consistent across leadership groups, and formal recognition systems should effectively support their use.

What is Your Compelling ‘Why’ to Follow the Rules?

When I coach front line leaders, I always like to ask them how they respond when someone asks them ‘Why do we have to follow this rule?’. As you might guess, undesirable answers to this question include “Because I told you to” and “I will get in trouble with my boss if you don’t.”

Such responses might garner compliance when the supervisor is present, but they rarely ensure people consistently follow the rules.

"The first step on the road to high performance begins with a choice."

I learned the concept of the 'compelling why' from Tony Robbins. Tony taught me that all too often we focus on 'how' we want to do something versus looking first at why we want to do it.

At work, we tell people how we want them to act and perform at work, but we fail to first give them a 'compelling why' for doing what we are asking (or telling) them to do. Rarely are threats of punishment a form of a compelling why.

When Might Formal Negative Discipline be Necessary?

Some cases warrant formal discipline. Examples of such cases include fights or illegal substance use on the job. Other examples include improper company document completion and theft of company property.

Some of my customers even have 'life saving rules'. These rules, if broken, result in termination. Examples include cellphone use in a company vehicle or failure to isolate equipment before work.

When it comes to effective rule enforcement, discipline should be the 'rarely used' exception, not the rule. My experiences and benchmarks convince me that positive formal and informal enforcement strategies are much more effective.

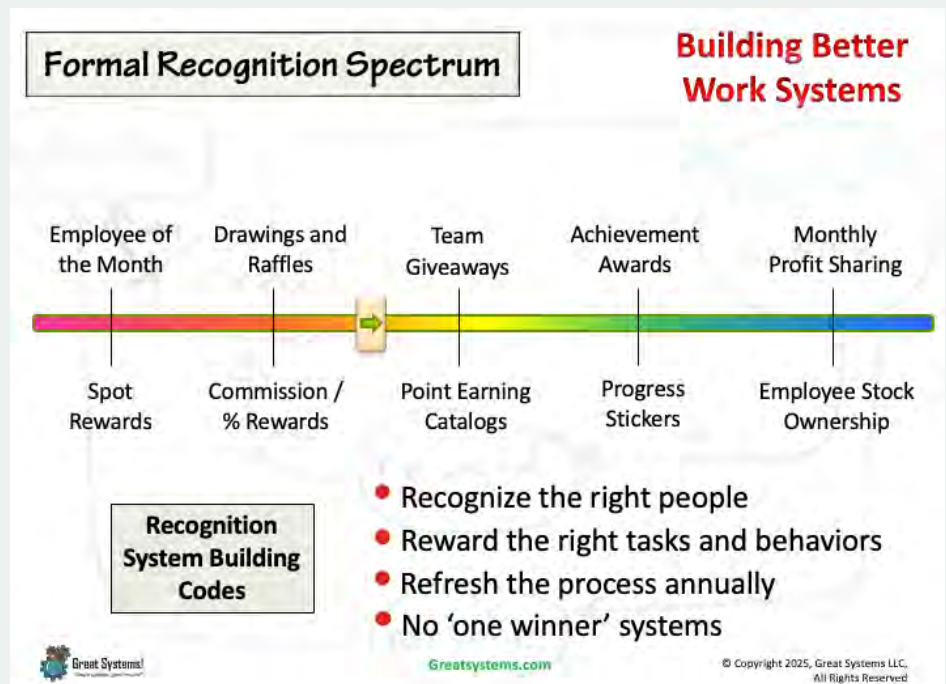
Most people follow the rules if they (1) know why it is important to follow the rules and (2) their leaders give them daily, consistent, positive, and meaningful feedback on their performance.

What Does the Use of Informal and Formal Recognition Look Like?

Informal positive enforcement works best when a leader delivers it in a daily, consistent, and meaningful manner (insert your 'compelling why' here).

Formal positive enforcement serves as the second most effective means of rule enforcement if leaders fairly distribute such recognition in a consistent and timely manner (sooner versus later). Avoid 'one winner' systems at all costs.

Formal recognition approaches should recognize anyone who



“The first step on the road to high performance begins with a choice.”

achieves the desired levels of performance. Design an approach that incorporates all key performance areas, such as those where staff earn points when they achieve performance goals in different areas.

For example, staff can exchange points they earn for ‘company store’ items, gift cards, and even time off. Keys to success include the need to avoid favoritism as leaders provide recognition and ensure that the recognition-effort link is meaningful.

What are Some Other Keys to Effective Rule Enforcement?

Total employee engagement offers the best way to ensure effective rule compliance. Coach your process owners – essentially all formal leaders – to provide effective informal positive recognition.

You will make major strides towards higher levels of engagement. Include an assessment of leadership favoritism in the workplace on your leader effectiveness survey. In doing so, you help avoid the anti-engagement effect that such behavior and practices can have.

Possible Action Items

Improving Your Recognition System

Design It	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Define the desired recognition system outcomes ● Define / modify your existing recognition process ● Link recognition criteria to company scorecards
Build It	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Redesign leader jobs to provide more floor time ● Provide practice-based informal recognition training ● Implement a multi-year, evolving recognition plan
Use It	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Annually recognize all people who meet key criteria ● Recognize team success monthly ● Expect and assess informal daily recognition value
Improve It	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Build at risk pay and multiple recognition opportunities into all jobs ● Use surveys and other feedback to improve each recognition approach at least annually



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Jack Stack, who wrote “[The Great Game of Business](#)”, provides an equally great blueprint to give people a stake in the business and empower them to help revitalize Springfield Remanufacturing. Many of today’s [Malcolm Baldrige Quality Award recipients](#) experience equal success as they empower and engage their people in a systematic manner. In these cases, and others, people follow the rules because doing so helps both the organization and the employees achieve higher levels of sustained success.

In some of my earlier posts on that topic, I detail other proven engagement strategies. However, don’t forget the ‘compelling why’ concept mentioned above.

"The first step on the road to high performance begins with a choice."

To me, one must be able to consistently and effectively answer the 'Why do we have to follow the rules?' question.

This is one of the most, if not the most, important skills leaders need to have. Too many leaders struggle to answer this question themselves in a meaningful way.

Why do you follow the rules?

[WATCH my 'Alternatives to Discipline' video on my Great Systems YouTube channel](#)

Rule Enforcement Best Practices

Multiple approaches to rule enforcement are needed to send a clear, consistent message



- Each rule needs to be clearly defined – expectations and consequences
- Rules must be clearly, consistently, and regularly communicated
- Audits, training, and job prep are also used to reinforce rules
- Positive reinforcement works better than negative reinforcement
- All leaders must use a consistent approach to rule enforcement
- Discipline should only be used for 'one off' situations

About the author

As Chief Excellence Officer of Great Systems LLC, Kevin McManus provides virtual coaching and content to help people use proven best practices to enhance and optimize their daily work systems.

Over forty years of work experience in roles such as Industrial Engineer, Training Manager, Production Manager, Plant Manager, and Director of Quality give Kevin a 'real life work' perspective relative to daily work process optimization, work team engagement and empowerment, and sustainable operational excellence.



As a contract trainer for the TapRoot® root cause analysis process, Kevin has taught over 450 courses and further enhanced his ability to help leaders proactively minimize risk, reduce errors, and improve reliability. Kevin holds an undergraduate degree in Industrial Engineering and an MBA. He served as a national Malcolm Baldrige Performance Excellence Award Examiner for twenty years, including a three-year term on the national Judge's Panel.

Kevin has authored the monthly performance improvement column for Industrial and Systems Engineer magazine for over 20 years, is an Institute of Industrial and Systems Engineering Fellow and has been a member of IISE for over forty years. His newest book, "Different Company – How the Best Build Great Organizations", will be published in late 2025.

If you would like more information about the improvement tools and systems I have to offer, please send me an e-mail at kevin@greatsystems.com.

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- 156 pages of exercises, tools, and examples to help you learn about and practice the fundamentals of mistake proofing and corrective action writing
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- Over 100 proven techniques to help minimize the risk and error potential associated with daily job completion



Error Proof

- 162 pages of examples, strategies and dialogue questions to help you stop daily goofs for good
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- 182 pages of ideas, tools, and examples to help you improve work team, project team, and focus team effectiveness
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- Two assessments to help you gauge the degree of support your lean efforts require and how much progress you make

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