

EXPLORING EMPLOYEE PERCEPTIONS OF FAIRNESS OF DISCIPLINARY MEASURES IN THE WORKPLACE

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Abstract

Disciplinary action and measures must be implemented to remedy undesirable workplace behaviour and channel employees' performance towards the attainment of organisational objectives. However, to achieve this, disciplinary measures should be designed and implemented in a fair and reasonable manner in the workplace, failing which, undesirable and negative outcomes may be experienced by the organisation. This paper's objective was to explore employee perceptions and perspectives regarding the implementation of disciplinary measures in the case organisation. To achieve this, a qualitative research design was adopted through the use of a case study strategy, utilising semi-structured interviews for data collection. A total of ten participants were purposively sampled within the case organisation, where responses from participants were analysed using content and thematic analysis. The study's findings revealed that disciplinary measures were inconsistently applied, where toxic leaders implement disciplinary action in an unfair manner. Findings further revealed that these perceptions of injustice and unfairness have resulted in the development of anger towards management and empathy for employees who were victimized through disciplinary action. It is recommended that the case organisation adhere to its disciplinary policy and code; eliminate the wasteful expenditure of state funds on disciplinary cases without merit, in addition to the appointment of senior based on merit.

Keywords: Disciplinary measures, fairness, inconsistency, unfairness.

1. Introduction and Background

Within contemporary workplaces, organisations are composed of individuals from varied backgrounds, experiences, attitudes and expectations. When these individuals interact for the furtherance and attainment of organisational goals, conflict is bound to arise. To ensure that this conflict does not become destructive, organisations design and implement disciplinary systems and measures. Disciplinary systems and processes are an approach utilised by management to remedy undesirable workplace behaviour by instituting corrective action measures (Tamunomiebi & Emeh, 2023).

Within organisations, an effective disciplinary system promotes efficiency and effectiveness, thereby increasing employee engagement, promoting labour peace and advancing collegiality amongst employees (Agbeyinka, 2024). Furthermore, within a South African context, organisations are obliged to design effective disciplinary systems that allow for varied ways to attempt to remedy employee behaviour before an employment relationship can be declared as intolerable or impossible to continue (Mabusela et al., 2024). It can therefore be inferred that disciplinary systems and measures strive to correct ineffective behaviour whilst promoting the maintenance of desirable behaviour in the workplace. Moreover, the absence of effective disciplinary systems within organisations allow ineffective performance and allow ineptitude employee behaviours (Tamunomiebi & Emeh, 2023). Bhavani (2020) supports this view, stating that the effective design and implementation of disciplinary systems is essential for the optimal performance of workplaces, as a disciplined workforce supports organisations in achieving its strategic and operational goals.

In light of the above, it becomes evident that effective disciplinary systems and measures are a crucial tool for organisations to channel employee behaviour and actions towards the achievement of organisational objectives. This view is supported by Bodo (2018) who asserts that

a disciplined workforce focuses on promoting productivity and fostering compliance to organisational policies and practices. However, to reap the benefits of disciplinary action, an organisation needs to design and implement fair and transparent disciplinary systems. Disciplinary action in the workplace is inevitable, but such disciplinary action must be based on principles of fairness (Jalloh et al., 2023). Apalia (2017) concurs, stating that disciplinary action should be instituted without creating feelings of resentment in the workplace. Furthermore, applying disciplinary action must always focus on undesirable employee performance and behaviours, and not exclusively on the personality or demeanor that an employee may display in the workplace (Jalloh et al., 2017). Employees should not feel unjustly targeted or any sense of victimisation when disciplinary measures are instituted in a workplace (Matey, 2023).

1.1 Problem Statement, Research Question and Objective

Disciplinary action and measures correct undesirable workplace behaviours and plays a crucial role in the realisation of organisational goals and objectives. However, to be effective and achieve its purposes, disciplinary measures need to be designed and applied in a fair and reasonable manner. Without these principles of fairness and reasonability, employees may develop perceptions of injustice and dissatisfaction towards the organisation's disciplinary system and processes. Moreover, these perceptions of injustice and unfairness may manifest into undesirable workplace behaviour and performance, negatively affecting an organisation's effectiveness and efficiency.

Research question

In light of the research problem, the study speaks to the following research question:

- What perceptions do employees hold regarding disciplinary measures within the case organisation?

Research objective

The primary objective of the study is:

To understand employees' perceptions around disciplinary measures within the case organisation.

2. Literature Review

In order to derive the full purposes and benefits of disciplinary action, it must be designed and implemented for reasons of correcting undesirable employee behaviour and promoting organisational performance. Matey (2023) advocates that disciplinary action in contemporary workplaces should be based on sound theory and reasonability, to allow principles of fairness and equity to constantly prevail. Moreover, effective disciplinary systems are grounded in principles of fairness and organisational justice, where all employee behaviours and actions are treated consistently and equitably. These characteristics will be explored further in this literature review, commencing with the essential elements of disciplinary systems and measures.

2.1 Essential Elements of Disciplinary Systems and Measures

The effectiveness of any disciplinary measure is dependent, to a great extent, on the motives and circumstances around its application (Cole, 2008). For effectiveness to be achieved there should be a substantively and procedurally fair reason for embarking on disciplinary action in the workplace. Bendix (2010) defines substantive fairness as the reason for the disciplinary action, referring to whether a work rule was breached and whether the employee was reasonably aware

of this work rule. Disciplinary action should thus be undertaken in cases of unacceptable work behaviour or performance, with the appropriate process being followed within the organisation. van Niekerk et al. (2012) define procedural fairness as a process that is effected in accordance with a fair procedure. This would necessitate that a manager follows all related protocol before imposing a disciplinary sanction on an employee, allowing employees to state their case in defense of the allegations, as well as exercising their right to representation; to mention but a few procedural aspects. Lewis et al. (2003) argue that the purpose of disciplinary action is to protect individuals against arbitrary treatment, while also allowing employers to dispense with an employee who performs or behaves in an unsatisfactory manner. A disciplinary procedure thus benefits both the employer and employee in this respect, but only if it is followed in a transparent and diligent manner.

In a nutshell, effective disciplinary systems and measures should emphasise constructive behaviours expected of employees, allowing all employees to be aware of how they should behave and conduct themselves in the workplace (Choudhary & Rana, 2022). This is one of the purposes and functions of disciplinary action in workplaces, and this aspect will be delved into next.

2.2 Purpose and Functions of Disciplinary Action in the Workplace

Ishiaka (2025) defines disciplinary action as the systematic implementation of workplace rules and regulations in order to correct employee behaviour, allowing an organisation to achieve its strategic objectives and operational objectives. Disciplinary action is the design and implementation of standards and regulations that enable employees to respect workplace decorum and organisational rules (Çetinkaya & Koçyiğit, 2020). Moreover, the concept of disciplinary action implies a state of order within organisations (Bhavani, 2020).

Okolie and Udom (2019) state that disciplinary measures are implemented as a practical means of ensuring employee compliance to acceptable norms and standards in the workplace. The main purpose of disciplinary action is improving organisational efficiency and correcting behaviour in support of the smooth functioning of workplaces (Bhavani, 2020). Moreover, an organisations efficiency and productivity are promoted and maintained by effective disciplinary systems and measures (Ishiaka, 2025). In a nutshell, disciplinary action serves as a corrective measure to guide employee behaviour and advance appropriate levels of performance in the workplace. A disciplined and focused workforce strives to edge an organisation closer to improved and sustained levels of productivity and profitability (Matey, 2023). Shabangu et al. (2022) support this view, highlighting that transparent and fair disciplinary measures reduce friction and tensions in the workplace, promoting productivity and positive work engagements. Additionally, effective disciplinary action boosts employee morale, encourages healthy workplace relationships and reduces undesirable workplace conduct such as corruption, theft, insolence and insubordination amongst others (Ishiaka, 2025).

Remedying and/or thwarting unwanted employee behaviours and upholding organisational order and rules is what disciplinary action primarily entails (Ishiaka, 2025). Moreover, disciplinary action must be fair and applied equitably to employees at all occupational levels within the organisation (Matey, 2023). Moreover, when disciplining employees, it is fundamentally important to ensure that the disciplinary sanction imposed on an employee is equivalent to the misconduct committed in the workplace (Apalia, 2017). Okolie and Udom (2019) mention that in order to be deemed reasonable and fair, disciplinary action must be implemented consistently and possess a uniformed approach in upholding rules and standards

within organisations. Organisational effectiveness and its functionality will be compromised where there is a lack of fairness and reasonability in the application of disciplinary action (Agbeyinka, 2024). Perceptions of injustice by employees could trigger different forms of misconduct and behaviours, and these behaviours may be in contradiction to the organisation's rules and regulations. These perceptions related to fair treatment that may be held by employees will next be explored.

2.3 Perceptions of Fair Treatment in the Workplace

Fair treatment in the workplace is an element, which both employer and employees search for within the employment relationship (Bendix, 2010). Employers expect employees to obey reasonable work instructions and to achieve organisational goals, while employees expect fair treatment and working conditions from the business (du Plessis & Fouche, 2006). Hall et al., (2013) explain that both the employer and employee should feel that the employment relationship is a fair exchange in order for effective outcomes to be achieved. This fair exchange may relate to factors such as carrying out lawful work instructions, feeling appreciated in the workplace, and being treated with dignity and respect.

Coetzee and Botha (2012) postulate that employees make decisions about the degree to which they place the interests and welfare of the organisation above their own. Employees may even sacrifice their own private time for the sake of achieving certain business goals, if they feel a strong bond and sense of loyalty towards the organisation. Coetzee and Botha (2012), further advance that being treated fairly gives an indication to employees that they are respected as human beings, and not only seen as a means to an end. Within the context of disciplinary action, perceptions of fairness play a big role in how employees react towards an act of discipline by the employer (Grogan, 2009). Bendix (2010) mentions that where employees view the disciplinary action as being an unfair act, the effectiveness of that act will be greatly deteriorated and the correction of the problematic behaviour will thus not be achieved. Following the correct procedure in disciplining employees becomes important in this context, as objective and reasonable criteria should be applied before a decision to discipline can be made (Finnemore, 2006). Certo (2006) states that employees view fairness as an important trait in a manager, as they expect equitable treatment from their superiors. Using discipline as any other means than correcting behaviour can have negative consequences on employees' perceptions of their managers, which could minimise levels of trust in the employment relationship (van Niekerk et al., 2012).

Certo (2006) states that when employees perceive that their managers have favourites amongst their colleagues, this could create a sense of resentment on their part. It could occur where one colleague is taken to task for violating a work rule, while no action is taken against another for the same offence. "In some cases, employees' resentment can breed unethical responses that make the situation even worse" (Certo, 2006, p. 102). An example of this differing treatment could be when one employee is late for duty and is treated harshly compared to another who regularly arrives late at work. Camen et al., (2008) conclude that employees who observe their managers differing treatment of colleagues tend to have a less optimistic psychological contract with the organisation.

The perceptions regarding fair and equitable treatment in the workplace is highly influenced by the levels of organisational justice experienced in the organisation. Ehlers (2020) advances that the perceived levels of organisational justice in the workplace evoke the spirit of equity and fairness within employment relationships, where employment parties will interact based on principles of honesty and transparency. The element of organisational justice will be expanded

upon next.

2.4 Organisational Justice in the Workplace

When one hears the words organisational justice, the first thing that usually comes to mind is treating employees in a fair manner within the workplace. Burke and Cooper (2008), explain that justice involves matters of fairness; fairness in procedures that are implemented to reach decisions and also fairness in the end results of these decisions. Burke and Cooper (2008) further declare that fairness is a perception, and is viewed differently from person to person.

Coetzee and Botha (2012) state that any discussion of employee treatment without some kind of reference to justice is not possible. This is because fairness is a value judgement, and justice involves making the correct decisions around that fairness in the organisation. Burke and Cooper (2008), define organisational justice as the extent to which fair labour practices are implemented against employees within their workplace setting. Fairness is an important, if not the most important, perceived measure of justice by employees in the workplace (Bendix, 2010). Organisational justice consists of three components, namely:

- Distributive justice: Murtaza et al. (2011) refer to distributive justice as the perceived fairness that an individual experiences based on the outcomes of the decision reached;
- Procedural justice: “refers to the fairness of workplace rules and policies” (Burke & Cooper, 2008, p. 86). Cropanzano (2001) refers to procedural fairness as concerning issues related to the methodologies, processes and mechanisms utilised to reach an outcome. Procedural fairness is thus an important element of organisational justice, as it involves the procedure behind reaching a certain outcome or decision; and
- Interactional justice: Coetzee and Botha (2012), define interactional justice as the manner in which individuals are treated in the workplace. It refers to “treating participants with consideration and recognizing their right to dignity” (Burke & Cooper, 2008, p. 73). The way in which people are treated in the workplace is crucial, and this fair treatment in interactional justice consists of important components. Katono et al. (2012) mention factors such as trust, meaningful work duties, and respect amongst colleagues, dignity and honesty as important components for fair interactions in the workplace.

Grogan (2009) states that fair treatment and justice in the workplace are important, as they establish feelings of security and predictability in an organisation. Applying disciplinary action inconsistently may create a perception that there is an absence of such justice, accompanied by feelings of unfairness amongst employees. This may have negative consequences for a business. Burke and Cooper (2008), state that vengeful behaviours result from experiences of unfair treatment or injustice at the workplace. This could manifest in behaviours such as sabotage, theft, deliberate poor work performance or acts of violence in the workplace (Burke & Cooper, 2008). The behaviours mentioned here may lead to increased ill-discipline within the business, which is the opposite of the purpose of disciplinary action in the first place. This escalation of poor behaviour will eventually result in increased cases of disciplinary action, which could have been avoided, had discipline been implemented consistently. Mathis et al., (2014) explain that distributive and procedural justice principles suggest that when a manager tolerates ill-discipline from an employee, other employees may dislike that unfairness towards the tolerance.

Finnemore (2006) advocates that applying discipline consistently and fairly can result in an organisation avoiding any undesirable consequences, and will establish a sense of justice in the workplace. Where employees perceive organisational justice and fairness in the workplace, this can lead to increased levels of job satisfaction, organisational citizenship behaviour and psychological attachment to the organisation (Mosley et al., 2011).

3. Research Methodology

To explore the perceptions held by employees regarding disciplinary measures within the case organisation, a qualitative research design was used. Furthermore, a case study strategy was utilised for this purpose. Semi-structured interviews were conducted for data collection purposes, in collaboration with observations and field notes. This approach allowed the research to be conducted in a natural environment, facilitating face-to-face interactions with research participants.

The key reason for using a qualitative approach was to obtain a richer and deeper understanding of participants' experiences and perspectives regarding the manner in which disciplinary action is applied in the case organisation. Qualitative studies involve the exploration of a phenomenon as a process over time, that attains relevancy as theories related to organisational management develop with time (Babbie & Mouton, 2001). Furthermore, qualitative research is fundamentally inductive, frequently resulting in the development of new theories (Babbie & Mouton, 2001). To extract effective responses from research participants regarding the phenomena under study, an interview guide was developed (See Table 1 below):

Table 1: Interview Guide

1. What perceptions do employees hold regarding disciplinary measures within the organisation
1.1 With regard to disciplinary action in the workplace, what is your experience in terms of its use for the intended purpose?
1.2 After experiencing a disciplinary hearing, how did you feel?
1.3 Do you feel that trade union shop-stewards do enough to assist employees during disciplinary matters? Please elaborate.
1.4 What is your perception of the consistency of the application of disciplinary action in the organisation?

Source: Author's fieldwork

The research set out to explore perceptions and experiences of research participants employed within the case organisation, which is located in Johannesburg, Gauteng Province, South Africa. The organisation is classified as a state owned entity within the country. The study's sample was purposively selected, inclusive of ten research participants. The purposive sample consisted of employees from top management, middle management, junior management, trade union representatives as well as employees who have experienced disciplinary action within the case organisation themselves. All these individuals have played some kind of role in the organisation's disciplinary system, as either disciplinary chairpersons, initiators, HR representatives, panel members or forensic investigators. This purposive sample therefore provided a rich source of information for the study, as they have been involved in every aspect of disciplinary action and the decisions that stemmed from it.

Table 2: Below Displays the Profile of Research Participants:

Research participant	RP1	RP2	RP3	RP4	RP5	RP6	RP7	RP8	RP9	RP10	TOTAL
											10 Research participants:
	M	F	M	M	M	M	F	F	M	M	7 Males
											3 Females
Age	41	33	37	37	43	46	49	34	55	36	average age of research participant
Organisational level	Middle manager	Junior manager	Middle manager	Senior administrator	Administrator	Supervisor	Top management	Junior manager	Specialist manager	Top management	Top Mgt : 2 Middle Mgt : 3 Junior Mgt : 2 Supervisor : 1 Administrators: 2
Time	6	8	7	14	9	18	11	8	26	3	average years of service in case organisation
Highest level of education	Master's degree	Diploma	Degree	Master's degree	Matric	Diploma	Degree	Honours	Honours	MBA	Masters/MBA: 3 Honours : 2 Degree : 2 Diploma : 2 Matric : 1
Union affiliated	Y	Y	N	N	Y	Y	N	N	N	Y	Yes : 5 No : 5

Source: Author's fieldwork

4. Findings and Discussion

This section articulates the research findings and discussion, which supports the interpretation of frequency and ranking of emergent themes, as obtained from the responses of participants. Participant responses were analysed through content and thematic analysis, in relation to participants' perceptions and perspectives regarding the implementation of disciplinary action in the case organisation (See Table 3):

Table 3: Frequency and ranking of emergent themes for participants perceptions regarding disciplinary action in the case organisation

Emergent themes	Frequency	Total
Inconsistency	xxxxxxxx	9
Misuse of discipline	xxxxxxxx	8
Toxic leaders	xxxxx	5
Empathy for affected employees	xxxxx	5
Anger	xxxx	4
Ineffective shop stewards	xxxx	4
Management influencing DC processes	xxx	3

Valid disciplinary action	xxx	3
False allegations	xx	2
Consistency	x	1

Source: Author's fieldwork

4.1 Understanding employees' perceptions around disciplinary measures within the case organisation

In terms of employees' perceptions around disciplinary measures at the state owned entity, it was found that employees perceive disciplinary action as being inconsistently applied in the organisation under study. This became apparent from the following quote: "According to my view I believe there is no consistency at all "(RP7). The literature dictates that where an organisation fails to comply with its own standard operating procedures, inconsistencies are created within the application of these processes, which in turn creates negative perceptions of fairness amongst employees (Bendix, 2010). Findings from the interviews revealed that these inconsistencies lead to feelings of unfairness and insecurity, where participants felt that the impact of these inconsistencies negatively affect productivity and staff morale within the organisation.

The findings further revealed that within the organisation, both historical and contemporaneous inconsistencies exist. The literature defined historical inconsistency as employees who have committed the same acts of misconduct as a number of other employees had in the past, but are measured by a different standard and therefore not taken through disciplinary action or receiving a lenient sanction as compared to that in the past (du Plessis & Fouche, 2006). The literature further defined contemporaneous inconsistency as two or more employees engaging in the same or similar misconduct during approximately the same time period within the case organisation, but only one or a few of those employees are disciplined, or where dissimilar sanctions are imposed amongst them (Finnemore, 2006).

The findings revealed that participants perceived disciplinary action as being misused to further certain individuals' agendas within the organisation, where disciplinary action is now not being applied for its intended purpose. This was inferred from comments by participants such as the following: "Well, I will not be able to prove it, but my opinion is that discipline is nowadays selectively applied, more in cases where people become hurdles in the process on the higher levels of the organisation" (RP9). As aforementioned in the literature, the ultimate purpose of disciplinary action is to correct undesirable workplace behaviour to channel employees' efforts towards the achievement of organisational goals (du Plessis & Fouche, 2006). Findings from the data also suggest that within the organisation under study, this does not always seem to be the case. It was found that disciplinary action was used by "toxic leaders" within the organisation to achieve ulterior motives which only contributed towards their self-serving purposes within the workplace. In the words of RP4, "There is no consistency. There is not any. This organisation really has to clean itself up; it has to clean its reputation especially when it comes to management". Therefore, it can be said that certain members within management have compromised the consistency of disciplinary action, where these members of management have subsequently earned a bad or "toxic" reputation as a result of their actions in the case organisation. Literature clarified that these behaviours by management are not always sanctioned by the organisation but are a sign of revengeful actions on their part by using disciplinary action to further their own interests (Agbeyinka, 2024). As a result of their own experiences of toxic leaders within the case organisation, it emerged from the data analysis that participants' felt a sense of

empathy for other employees who are being disciplined for ulterior and self-serving purposes. This can be inferred from the interviews, where participants expressed the following sentiments, “As a representative, it’s never nice to see your member being violated or taken advantage of in a DC” (RP6). The data revealed that this sense of empathy seemed to extend to employees who would also encounter these toxic leaders in future; where employees might be disciplined for any reason should they become “hurdles” in the path of the current leadership within the organisation.

The data further revealed that employees who have experienced these inconsistencies and misuse of disciplinary action harbour feelings of anger towards senior management of the organisation. This was found as per the following responses from participants who had been disciplined for perceived unfair reasons: “I feel extremely angry, I wish I had more powers to question the leadership and to actually take them through disciplinary action themselves for their actions” (RP10). Another participant added: “I felt aggrieved and taken advantage of and especially it lowered my professional and self or personal worth” (RP4). Findings from the interviews also revealed that these participants felt that the “unfair disciplinary action” had lowered their professional standing within the organisation and that they were “targeted” for simply attempting to do their jobs in the correct manner. It was apparent from the data that trade union representatives are perceived as being ineffective within the organisation. “I feel they need to advise their members appropriately” (RP3). Another participant added: “Shop stewards at times lose the plot and end up fighting issues which are not relevant to their members or the merits of the particular case they are dealing with” (RP10). Evidence in the literature suggested that trade union representatives or shop stewards are elected by employees with a view to protecting workplace rights and promoting fair workplace practices within an organisation (Finnemore, 2006). Burke and Cooper (2008), further adds that union representatives protect an employee from an unprocedural hearing, while assisting lower level employees who may not be conversant on employment relations and disciplinary practices in the workplace. This finding is particularly concerning because if the shop stewards within the state owned entity do not possess the skills and competencies required to effectively protect employees from inconsistencies in the workplace, this could further contribute to inconsistencies occurring in future.

Findings from the data analysis show that when management attempt to “get rid” of certain employees, they unduly influence disciplinary processes within the organisation. Findings from the interviews alluded to the undue influence appearing in the form of certain “mandates” being directed at employees within the HR department, where they are expected to carry out a work instruction which may not be for a fair or valid reason. Hall et al., (2013), explained that these types of actions by senior management violate the fair exchanges which are expected from employer and employees based on the contract of employment. Once either party within the employment relationship perceive their rights as being violated or infringed upon, a sense of unfairness exists which could result in undesirable behaviours and negative consequences for an organisation (Coetzee et al., 2012). Observations made during the interview process revealed that participants felt that these negative consequences could be avoided if disciplinary action was actually used for its intended purpose within the organisation, but this does not seem to be the situation currently in the present organisation under study.

The findings revealed that there are certain instances where disciplinary action was perceived as being valid within the organisation. Participants stated that this validity would depend on the type of misconduct committed and the severity thereof, where the organisation would have no choice but to discipline the employee for this transgression. As RP8 stated: “unfortunately when you look at serious misconduct such as fraud and the like, you have no alternative but to dismiss”.

This statement is substantiated by Grogan (2009) who explained that there are certain actions which the organisation simply cannot condone from its employees, where disciplinary action is the only suitable recourse to deal with these actions committed. Bhavani (2020) further added to this by explaining that these types of behaviours erode the trust relationship between employer and employee, where one party to the employment relationship had broken the reciprocal element involved in a contract of employment.

Interestingly, the findings showed that although there are and have been cases of valid disciplinary action being taken within the case organisation, some employees were charged with false allegations which have been levelled against them in the course of their duties as employees. It emerged from the data analysis that certain participants perceived that senior management had “concocted and brewed” false allegations in an attempt to get them out of the way. This was inferred from what was said in the following: “So you actually have me, for example, being charged with made up charges” (RP10). Another participant added: “I got punished for something that I never did” (RP4). It is clear from the findings that these participants viewed their disciplinary action as unfair, and that they were “targeted” within the organisation.

An interesting and outlying finding did, however, emerge from the data. This relates to a remote occurrence, where one research participant perceived that disciplinary action was consistently applied within the organisation under investigation. This was noted through the following remark: “I would say it is consistent” (RP3). This was in stark contrast to the rest of the research participants who revealed that disciplinary action was being applied in an inconsistent manner. Findings from the data analyses alluded to this research participant’s rationale not being convincing, as his responses were based on his line of work, and what he believed consistency meant within the context in which it was raised.

Based on the discussion outlined above, research objective two, which dealt with understanding employee perceptions regarding disciplinary measures, has been achieved. Employees perceive disciplinary action as being inconsistently applied within the organisation, with the misuse of disciplinary action further contributing to this phenomenon. The presence of toxic leaders in the workplace is perceived to be the root cause of inconsistencies and victimisation, as the disciplinary process is used to “settle scores” and “get people out of the way”, because they are perceived to be “hurdles” during the course of executing their duties.

5. Limitations of the Study

As with every academic study, this research possessed its own limitations. Firstly, the research was undertaken in the Johannesburg area, where participants are employed in the case organisation. Therefore, HR professionals as well as individuals involved in disciplinary systems outside of Johannesburg could not be included due to geographical challenges. To mitigate this, my research participants included individuals who are highly educated and possess great experience in matters involving disciplinary measures. The second limitation relates to qualitative research usually being categorised as subjective. This is owing to the data articulating their lived experiences, perceptions and perspectives. Therefore, the data is inherently subjective and would vary from one setting to the next. Thirdly is that researchers are at the fore of data attainment involving qualitative research. As such, it could pose the challenge of bias entering into the study and possibly influencing the quality of the research. However, the study utilised reflexivity and bracketing as a means to mitigate limitations associated with qualitative research (Cresswell, 2014). The final limitation involves participants having been purposively sampled for the study. To mitigate this limitation, criteria was developed to choose only HR professionals, trade union

representatives, disciplinary panel members and individuals who have knowledge of and have experienced disciplinary action in the case organisation. Moreover, some of the HR professionals included in the sample started out their careers as trade unionists, which allowed them to experience disciplinary measures holistically as management implementers and employee representatives.

6. Recommendations

6.1 Adherence to Organisational Policies and Procedures and Improved Communication

Regardless of how sound or fair a disciplinary policy and process is, it will be rendered as being ineffective if it is not strictly adhered to within the organisation. Hence, in order to address this issue, line management within the organisation must respect and obey the disciplinary policy and process, and apply it when and where necessary in all instances without fear or favour. There is also a need for line management to improve its communication methods when contemplating disciplining an employee. This should allow the affected line manager to receive adequate advice on how to handle the matter with the respective employee, and a process should be enacted to resolve the matter in a fair and transparent manner. The affected employee's trade union must also be communicated with throughout the process in order to allow them to consult with the employee and approach the matter in an amicable manner.

6.2 Eliminating Wasteful Expenditure on Disciplinary Cases without Merit

There is an urgent need for the organisation to avoid pursuing disciplinary matters that lack merit and fairness. Moreover, these are the type of cases where toxic leaders attempt by any means, to suspend or discipline an employee for personal and/or self-serving reasons, which result in hundreds of thousands of rands being spent on external lawyers, litigation fees and settlement agreements at external dispute resolution bodies. Instead, where a case has no merit, this should be communicated internally and the matter should be regarded as closed at that point, without any state funds being spent on consultations with private and associated law firms. In addition to this, and as articulated in the literature and illustrated in Figure 6.1, there are certain types and levels of misconduct, which can be approached in an informal manner. This approach will be useful in cases where an employee has committed an honest mistake (in good faith), or where no intention of wilful wrongdoing is found on the part of the affected employee. This would negate the need to assemble disciplinary panels for each and every act of misconduct in the workplace, and save the organisation time and productivity, as potential panel members will perform their usual day to day duties instead of sitting in disciplinary hearings for days or weeks.

6.3 Appointment of Top and Senior Managers Based on Merit

Lastly, within this proposed change of leadership, it is recommended that top and senior leaders should be recruited based on their qualifications and experience within industry and nothing else. This means that no other fickle or irrelevant criteria should be considered for critical positions such as that of the CEO, COO, CFO and members of the board. This will ensure that the state owned entity has qualified and competent individuals in key positions, which will allow mistakes of the past not to be repeated, and facilitate the organisation's pursuit in the delivery of its mandate to citizens of the country.

7. Conclusion

The articulation of the research problem highlights that disciplinary measures serve important

purposes within organisations, but only if it is applied in a reasonable and fair manner. Within the case organisation, research participants perceive disciplinary measures as being inconsistently and unfairly applied by toxic leaders within the organisation. Moreover, this has caused feelings of anger among staff as well as feelings of empathy for those victimised through disciplinary action. In light of this, the study's findings confirmed the research problem, where it was found that employees may develop perceptions of injustice and dissatisfaction towards the organisations disciplinary system and processes where it is unfairly applied. These perceptions of injustice and unfairness could manifest in undesirable workplace behaviours that negatively affect the smooth functioning and effectiveness of the organisation. Consequently, it is recommended that the case organisation adhere to disciplinary codes and policies and improve transparent communication, eliminate wasteful expenditure on disciplinary cases that have no merit and appoint senior leadership based on merit.

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