



Supervisor Documentation & Corrective Action Toolkit

A Practical Guide for Supervisors and Manager



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Supervisor Documentation & Corrective Action Toolkit

This toolkit is designed to give supervisors the confidence and clarity they need to document effectively, coach proactively, and navigate corrective action with consistency and fairness. Documentation is not about catching people doing something wrong. It's about setting clear expectations, supporting success, and protecting both the employee and the organization.

What This Toolkit Is (and Is Not)

This toolkit is designed to help supervisors do three things well:

1. **Set and reinforce clear expectations.**
2. **Document behavior and performance in a way that is factual, fair, and useful.**
3. **Navigate corrective action with confidence and consistency.**

It is **not** a legal textbook, and it is not written to turn supervisors into HR. It's a practical "grab and go" resource: simple language, real examples, and tools they can actually use on a busy Tuesday when three people called out and urgent issues are piling up.

Throughout this toolkit, examples of documentation appear in the past tense, while instructional guidance uses the present tense.

Section 1: Why Documentation Matters

Supervisors usually learn about documentation the hard way: when it's missing.

Poor or inconsistent documentation shows up as:

- “We can’t move to termination yet. There’s nothing in writing.”
- “This looks like it’s coming out of nowhere.”
- “We *know* this has been happening, but there’s no record.”

Good documentation:

- **Protects the employee** – they know what the issue is and what’s expected.
- **Protects the supervisor** – decisions are supported by facts, not memory.
- **Protects the company** – you can show that you were fair, consistent, and aligned with policy.
- **Supports better coaching** – you’re not arguing about whether something happened. You’re talking about how to fix it.

At its core, documentation is about **clarity and fairness**, not punishment.

What Effective Documentation Looks Like

Effective documentation is:

- **Factual:**
 - “On May 3, the cash drawer was short \$27.50 at the end of the shift,” not “She’s careless with money.”
- **Specific:**
 - Dates, times, behaviors, and impact—not vague generalities like “always” or “never.”
- **Timely:**
 - Written as close to the event or conversation as possible, while details are still fresh.
- **Objective:**
 - Focused on what was said or done, not on personality or attitude.
- **Action-oriented:**
 - Tied to expectations and next steps: What needs to change? By when? What support will be provided?

I want supervisors to hear this clearly: If you wouldn’t be comfortable reading it out loud in a room with the employee, HR, and an attorney, don’t write it that way.

What Documentation Is Not

Supervisors sometimes treat documentation like a venting tool or a secret diary. That creates risk and undermines trust.

Documentation is **not**:

- A place to unload frustration
- A collection of opinions about someone's character
- A record of every small annoyance
- A way to "build a case" in secret while avoiding real conversations
- A substitute for training, coaching, or clear expectations

If your goal is to "catch" an employee, the intent is already wrong. The purpose is to **clarify, support, and hold accountable**. Sometimes that ends in improvement; sometimes it ends in separation. But either way, the process should be honest and transparent.

Guiding Principles for Supervisors

1. Assume most people want to succeed.

Documentation and corrective action should start from the assumption that with clarity and support, most employees can get back on track.

2. Talk first, write second.

If your first move is typing an email to HR instead of having a conversation with the employee, flip that. The conversation should drive the documentation, not the other way around.

3. Be consistent, not robotic.

Use the progressive discipline framework as a guide, but remember: severity, intent, and risk matter. "Same behavior, same response" is the goal. This toolkit will help you get closer to that.

4. Stay in your lane and use your resources.

You don't have to know every law. Your job is to:

- Recognize issues
- Address them promptly
- Document them clearly
- And loop in HR when you're out of your depth or the risk is high.

5. If it's not written down, it didn't happen. (The Legal Reality Behind Documentation)

Supervisors often rely on memory or say "I've talked to them so many times." But from a legal and HR standpoint, undocumented conversations do not establish a pattern, and they do not support corrective action. If a situation escalates to

termination, unemployment claims, or allegations of unfair treatment, the absence of written documentation can severely limit the company's ability to defend its actions.

Verbal coaching is still important, but when patterns develop, you need something you can point to. If you've "had many conversations" with someone and nothing is in writing, those conversations don't help you.

Why Documentation Matters Legally

Employment decisions, especially disciplinary ones, must be based on **objective facts**, not recollections or impressions. When documentation is weak, inconsistent, or missing altogether, several problems arise:

- **It becomes your word against theirs.**
If we can't show a history of communication and coaching, we can't demonstrate that the employee was aware of expectations or had an opportunity to improve.
- **Patterns of behavior become impossible to substantiate.**
Courts, agencies, and even internal reviews look for a timeline with dates and specifics. A written progression of expectations and responses. Without that, "ongoing issues" are treated as unproven.
- **Corrective action appears sudden or arbitrary.**
That is one of the fastest paths to claims of discrimination or retaliation. Even if the decision was completely legitimate, lack of documentation makes it vulnerable.
- **Unemployment decisions often hinge on documentation.**
If we can't show the employee was warned, or that they understood the consequences, the state may rule in their favor.
- **Consistency is key in legal defensibility.**
Documentation shows that expectations were applied fairly across employees. Without it, comparisons fall apart.

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