

The Special Case of Insubordination

Insubordination is an over-used and misused word. In the work environment it has a very narrow definition with serious consequences to the work and to the employee.

What is insubordination?

Insubordination is a deliberate and inexcusable refusal to obey a [reasonable order](#) which relates to an employee's job function. The refusal may be openly stated or it may be a silent withholding of services. Merely [protesting](#) an assignment is not insubordination. Employees may not decide for themselves which instructions they will follow and which they will not. The employee is responsible for telling you why the order is being refused.

What to do if you believe insubordination has occurred

Rephrase the assignment as a specific requirement, not as a mere request.

It must be clear that the employee was told to do something, not just asked. (Note: Do not interpret this to mean that you should give all instructions in the form of commands. Phrasing instructions as requests is polite and motivating to most employees. If there is a problem with getting a particular instruction obeyed, then put it in the form of a specific requirement.)

State that noncompliance will result in discipline.

Tell the employee that refusal to fulfill a specific job requirement can lead to discipline up to and including end of employment. Ask why the order was not followed.

Correct or attempt to correct unsafe or illegal conditions.

If assistance is needed to correct or to determine how to correct an unsafe condition, contact the Environmental Health and Safety Manager. Consult Human Resources or University Corporation Counsel if there is uncertainty about the legality of the order.

If the order is still refused select appropriate disciplinary action.

Answer the following questions to determine the action to take:

- What is the employee's work record? Any similar offenses?
- What were the consequences of the insubordination to the employer and other employees?
- Were there any mitigating factors, factors that either caused or helped to explain the employee's actions?
- What discipline was given in similar cases?
- What level of discipline is needed to assure that the action does not occur again?