



The Cumulative Effect: When Small Behaviour Issues Become a Big Problem

Understanding the Cumulative Effect

Not every behaviour issue in the workplace is severe enough to warrant a formal warning on its own. However, a pattern of repeated lower-level misconduct - like frequent lateness, minor rudeness, resisting direction, or showing up with a negative attitude - can build up over time and have a major impact on team morale, productivity, and trust.

This is known as the 'cumulative effect' - a legitimate consideration for employers when small issues become a larger problem collectively. Ignoring these patterns can lead to team resentment, perceptions of unfairness, and the erosion of your workplace culture.

Recognising the Signs Early

As a manager or business owner, it's important to recognise the early signs of problematic behaviour, even if they seem minor at first. This might include a team member who consistently resists feedback, interrupts others in meetings, or fails to follow reasonable instructions. While none of these may be formal misconduct alone, together they may justify intervention.

Left unaddressed, these behaviours can frustrate other employees and damage engagement, especially if they feel leadership is failing to act.

What Can Employers Do?

Start by having informal conversations and documenting them. For example, if someone is late, have a private chat and make a brief note about what was discussed. If a colleague repeatedly talks over others, coach them gently but clearly, and follow up with an email confirmation.

If the behaviour continues, move to a more structured process, such as a Performance Improvement Plan, and if informal measures don't see the change needed, a formal pathway, such as a disciplinary investigation, may need to be considered. Following due process, a written warning can summarise the repeated concerns and reference how they collectively amount to a breach of expected standards. It is important that employees are clear about the requirements and potential consequences of not meeting them.

Pros and Cons of Acting on Cumulative Behaviour Issues

Pros:

- Maintains a healthy team environment
- Demonstrates fair and consistent leadership
- Encourages accountability
- Avoids escalation to bigger problems

Cons:

- Can be challenging to document clearly unless done consistently
- May be perceived as unfair if expectations and potential consequences have not been communicated well

- Requires capable leadership and fair and reasonable processes

How I Can Help

If you're unsure whether a behavioural pattern justifies formal action, I can help you review the situation and support you to develop a plan that is fair, well-documented, and compliant.

I also work with clients to prepare templates for performance discussions, guide you through appropriate wording for disciplinary documents, and coach leaders on giving feedback effectively - whether it's informal or formal.

Takeaway Tip

Don't wait for a single serious event before acting. Sometimes the biggest impacts come from what seems minor - until it becomes a pattern.

☎ 021 932 332 ✉ marie@tovioconsulting.co.nz 🌐 www.tovioconsulting.co.nz