

Beyond Rules: A Comparative View on Work Discipline Practices in Public and Private Workplaces

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to compare the implementation and perception of work discipline between a private-sector company and a public-sector institution in West Sumatra, Indonesia. Using a qualitative descriptive approach, the research explores how disciplinary systems operate, how leadership influences compliance, and how employees respond to enforcement in both organizational settings. Data was collected through interviews, observations, and document analysis, then analyzed using thematic and cross-case comparison methods. The results reveal that while both organizations recognize the importance of discipline, their enforcement strategies differ significantly. The private organization adopts a flexible and immediate approach supported by technology and managerial discretion but lacks structured reward mechanisms. In contrast, the public institution follows formal regulations with a clear procedural framework but faces challenges in day-to-day monitoring and enforcement. Both contexts demonstrate the critical role of leadership, internal culture, and perceived fairness in shaping disciplinary outcomes. This study contributes to the human resource management literature by highlighting how work discipline is not solely a matter of regulation but also a function of organizational behavior and employee perception. It offers practical recommendations for designing discipline systems that are procedurally sound, contextually adaptive, and human centered.

Keywords: work discipline, employee behavior, leadership, private sector, public sector, comparative study

1. Introduction

Work discipline remains one of the most critical pillars in ensuring organizational success. It encompasses employee compliance with rules, punctuality, and ethical conduct that collectively contribute to organizational performance, efficiency, and harmony. As stated by Wanta, Jamaludin, & Nandang (2022), work discipline directly affects employee performance, particularly in the service sectors where punctuality and reliability are fundamental indicators. Moreover, Mukrodi (2022) emphasized that discipline, alongside motivation, is a primary driver of productivity across various sectors.

Despite the importance of work discipline, its implementation remains complex, especially when viewed across different organizational types. In private companies, discipline is often closely tied to efficiency, customer satisfaction, and competitive edge. In contrast, public institutions typically rely on formal regulations such as government decrees (e.g., PP No. 94/2021 on Civil Servant Discipline) as the foundation for discipline enforcement (Yuaningsih, 2020). However, recent studies

have shown that mere reliance on formal rules is insufficient without strong leadership and consistent supervision Simatupang, Butarbutar, & Candra (2021).

The discipline system also intersects with organizational culture, leadership behavior, and employee perception. A consistent theme in literature is that fair enforcement of sanctions and recognition of compliant employees fosters a stronger sense of justice and accountability (Fitriani & Tresnawati, 2024; Wahyuni & Lubis, 2020). Conversely, inconsistent discipline practices often lead to dissatisfaction and reduced performance (Vandiarini & Manafe, 2022).

A notable gap in literature is the limited number of qualitative, context-sensitive studies that explore how discipline is perceived and experienced by employees on a daily basis, particularly in smaller operational units or front-line roles. Most prior studies adopt a quantitative approach, focusing on statistical relationships between discipline and performance, but fail to capture the nuanced, lived experiences of workers in enforcing or

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resisting discipline norms (Suparjo, Kumala, Dana, & Sunarsih, 2024).

This study addresses this research gap by conducting a comparative exploration of discipline implementation in two contrasting organizational settings: a private company and a public office in West Sumatra, Indonesia. It aims to examine how discipline is applied, monitored, and perceived in both contexts, while also identifying key challenges and enabling factors unique to each sector.

By providing empirical insights from both organizational domains, this research contributes to the growing body of human resource management literature with threefold significance: (1) offering context-rich findings on discipline practice; (2) highlighting the role of leadership, structure, and culture; and (3) informing HR policies that are both procedurally sound and humanistically grounded.

2. Literature Review

Concept of Work Discipline

Work discipline refers to an employee's willingness and awareness to comply with organizational rules, norms, and standards. It encompasses punctuality, adherence to procedures, proper conduct, and respect for organizational values (Hasibuan, 2009; Mukrodi, 2022). In human resource management, discipline functions not only as a corrective tool but also as a proactive mechanism to maintain productivity and organizational order (Rivai & Sagala, 2013).

Various indicators are frequently used to assess employee discipline, including attendance records, punctuality, compliance with standard operating procedures (SOP), responsible use of time and resources, and observance of workplace ethics (Vandiarini & Manafe, 2022; Yuaningsih, 2020). These behavioral markers reflect not only the employee's personal commitment but also the effectiveness of the organization's disciplinary systems.

The Role of Discipline in Enhancing Performance

A strong link between work discipline and employee performance is widely established in empirical studies. Fitriani and Tresnawati (2024) found that in manufacturing contexts, discipline significantly influences task completion, teamwork, and the achievement of performance targets. Similarly, Masruroh, Komarudin, Gunawan, Iskandar, & Dewi (2023) asserted that disciplined behavior forms the foundation for organizational efficiency, particularly in public service sectors.

Discipline improves consistency, reduces error rates, and fosters a culture of accountability (Suparjo et al., 2024). Moreover, organizations with high discipline levels tend to exhibit stronger team cohesion and higher employee morale (Wanta et al., 2022). These findings underscore the importance of not only implementing but also continuously reinforcing discipline through managerial leadership and organizational support.

Factors Influencing Discipline

Discipline does not emerge in a vacuum. It is shaped by multiple internal and external factors,

including leadership style, reward and punishment systems, organizational justice, supervision, peer influence, and perceived fairness (Hasibuan et al., 2023; Puspitasari, Sunardi, & Harsono, 2021). Effective leadership plays a particularly crucial role, as leaders who demonstrate consistency, integrity, and empathy are more likely to influence employee behavior positively (Wahyuni & Lubis, 2020).

Reward and punishment mechanisms remain key tools for reinforcing desired behaviors. However, as highlighted by Supriani and Maryono (2024), these tools must be applied fairly and transparently to prevent demotivation or resistance. Several studies have also noted the influence of organizational culture—values such as professionalism, mutual respect, and shared responsibility often correlate with higher levels of voluntary discipline (Yudirman, Samallo, & Zaman, 2023).

Challenges in Discipline Implementation

Despite its importance, discipline implementation is not without challenges. Studies have revealed that in both private and public sectors, inconsistencies in enforcement, leadership indecisiveness, and unclear rules often weaken disciplinary systems (Yuaningsih, 2020). In public institutions, discipline is often formalized through regulation, but this does not guarantee effective compliance unless supported by active monitoring and behavioral modeling by supervisors (Simatupang et al., 2021).

In private firms, on the other hand, the emphasis tends to be on performance-based outcomes, and discipline may be more flexibly interpreted, depending on managerial style and organizational culture (Kurnia & Senen, 2020). This sectoral distinction provides a valuable lens through which to examine how discipline is both structured and lived in diverse institutional environments.

Research Gap

The existing literature is heavily dominated by quantitative, correlation-based studies that explore the relationship between discipline and performance. However, there is a lack of in-depth qualitative investigations that examine **how discipline is enacted, perceived, and negotiated** in daily work contexts—particularly in small operational units and government divisions. Furthermore, few comparative studies focus specifically on the **sectoral contrasts between private and public institutions**, which are essential for formulating sector-specific human resource policies (Sataputra & Rostiana, 2020; Mukrodi, 2022).

3. Research Methods

This study employed a **qualitative descriptive comparative design** to explore how employee discipline is implemented and experienced in two different organizational settings: a private enterprise and a government institution. The purpose of this approach is to gain an in-depth understanding of disciplinary practices within their real-life contexts and to identify sectoral similarities and differences in disciplinary mechanisms and employee perceptions.

Research Subjects

This study focused on two organizational cases situated in West Sumatra, Indonesia, selected purposively for their contextual relevance, accessibility, and contrasting structural characteristics. The first case involved a private-sector manufacturing company, representing the commercial and performance-driven environment of the private domain. The second case involved a public-sector government agency, specifically a regional human resource management office, reflecting the bureaucratic and regulation-oriented nature of public administration. These two settings provided a meaningful basis for comparative analysis, enabling the study to explore how discipline is implemented and perceived within different institutional frameworks.

Data Sources and Instruments

Primary data in this study were collected through a combination of semi-structured interviews, non-participant observations, and analysis of organizational documents, including internal regulations, disciplinary records, and employee manuals. The interviews involved selected informants such as supervisors, HR personnel, and regular employees from both the private and public organizations. Informants were purposively selected based on their roles and direct involvement in disciplinary processes. To support data collection, several research instruments were employed: interview guides were used to explore perceptions, disciplinary practices, and challenges; field notes were compiled from direct observations during working hours; and document analysis sheets were utilized to examine the structure and implementation of disciplinary policies in both organizations.

Data Collection Procedure

Data collection followed a triangulation approach to ensure validity through cross-verification of data sources. Interviews were audio-recorded with participant consent and later transcribed verbatim. Observational data were recorded systematically using structured templates, focusing on punctuality, behavior, and supervisor-employee interactions. Document review provided contextual background on formal disciplinary procedures in both organizations.

The researchers spent approximately two weeks at each location during **mid-2025**, enabling a sufficient depth of engagement and familiarity with the organizational settings.

Data Analysis Technique

The collected data were analyzed using **thematic analysis**, allowing the identification of recurring patterns and themes related to disciplinary enforcement, employee compliance, and contextual influences. Codes were developed inductively from the data and grouped into thematic categories such as "supervisory style," "disciplinary fairness," and "employee resistance."

Subsequently, a **cross-case comparison** was conducted to highlight the differences and similarities between the private and public organizations.

This comparative lens facilitated the development of sector-specific insights and enhanced the generalizability of the findings to similar organizational contexts.

4. Results and Discussion

Study 1: Employee Discipline in a Private Organization

This study explores the application of employee discipline at a private company operating in the service and logistics sector in West Sumatra. The organization enforces work discipline through a blend of technological tools, management practices, and cultural expectations.

Organizational Discipline System. The company uses digital fingerprint attendance (check clock) and CCTV monitoring to track punctuality and presence. Infractions such as lateness are automatically penalized through payroll deductions. Plans to upgrade to an online mobile attendance system further reflect the organization's technological orientation.

Observed Practices. Discipline is reinforced through progressive sanctions—verbal warnings, written reprimands, and deductions. Leaders deliver these sanctions privately to maintain respect. Despite this, gaps exist in the consistency of enforcement, and there is no structured reward system yet in place.

Leadership and Communication. Leadership plays a central role. Supervisors lead by example, maintain professionalism, and prefer discreet corrections. This fosters mutual respect and reduces open conflict.

Employee Perception. Most employees view the system as fair and necessary. However, the absence of positive reinforcement creates a perception of imbalance between punishment and reward.

Implementation Strengths and Weaknesses. Strengths include technological integration and a culture of punctuality. Weaknesses lie in the uneven application of rules and limited institutional incentives.

Study 2: Employee Discipline in a Public Organization

This study examines a government institution responsible for human resources development in a West Sumatran regency. The office applies work discipline based on formal national regulations and structured internal mechanisms.

Institutional Discipline Framework. Discipline is enforced in accordance with Government Regulation No. 94 of 2021 on Civil Servant Discipline. Monitoring is supported by online attendance, performance appraisal via SKP (Employee Work Target), and structured SOPs.

Enforcement Practices. The institution employs non-punitive early interventions, including counseling and gradual disciplinary steps, before applying formal sanctions. The small team size (32 employees) allows close supervision.

Leadership and Bureaucratic Role. Leadership is seen as role-model-based and hierarchical. Leaders are expected to embody professionalism and discipline, and disciplinary matters follow strict protocols.

Employee Attitudes. Employees largely comply, acknowledging the legitimacy of regulations. However, issues like lateness and informal rule-bending still occur, reflecting latent cultural resistance and gaps in internal monitoring.

Operational Challenges. Despite adequate policy frameworks, inconsistencies arise in day-to-day implementation. The perception of impunity in minor infractions underscores the need for improved accountability systems.

Tabel 1. Comparative Dimensions of Work Discipline Implementation in Private and Public Organizations

Dimension	Private Organization	Public Organization
Basis of Regulation	Internal policy + managerial judgment	National regulations (PP 94/2021)
Technology Use	Digital fingerprint + CCTV	Online presence & e-performance
Disciplinary Tools	Sanctions-focused, reward absent	Sanctions and coaching-based
Leadership Style	Assertive, personalized	Formal, hierarchical
Employee Perception	Mixed, expect more recognition	Generally compliant, but passive
Consistency in Practice	Moderate to uneven	Procedural, yet inconsistently applied

The comparative analysis between the private and public organizations revealed several key differences in how work discipline is implemented and sustained. Private organizations tend to demonstrate greater flexibility and immediacy in enforcing disciplinary actions. Supervisors are often empowered to apply sanctions directly and respond swiftly to infractions, allowing for real-time behavioral correction. However, this responsiveness is not always complemented by structured incentive systems, which leads to a disciplinary climate that emphasizes punishment over recognition. As a result, while compliance may be achieved, long-term motivation and employee engagement may remain suboptimal.

In contrast, public institutions operate under strict regulatory frameworks, guided by national policies such as Government Regulation No. 94/2021. These regulations provide formal structure and procedural consistency, yet the rigid adherence to protocols often results in bureaucratic delays and reduced managerial autonomy. Consequently, disciplinary processes in public settings may lack responsiveness and tend to be perceived as overly procedural or symbolic rather than transformative.

Despite these sectoral differences, both organizational types recognize the central importance of leadership and organizational culture in shaping employee discipline. Effective discipline is not merely a function of written rules but also of how leaders embody those rules and how workplace norms evolve around them. Moreover, both

institutions employ technological tools—such as fingerprint scanners, online attendance systems, or CCTV—for monitoring punctuality and behavior. However, the extent and sophistication of technology integration differ, with private firms typically leveraging it for efficiency, while public institutions use it for compliance and record-keeping purposes. These shared elements underscore that discipline is both a technical and cultural construct, influenced by sectoral context but underpinned by universal principles of fairness, leadership, and communication.

Theoretical and Practical Implications

The findings from both organizational cases offer valuable contributions to the theoretical understanding and practical application of work discipline in contemporary human resource management. From a theoretical standpoint, the results affirm Hasibuan's (2009) model which posits that discipline is influenced not only by regulatory systems and sanctions but also by the presence of strong leadership and fair internal mechanisms. Both the private and public organizations studied demonstrate how discipline is applied through a combination of structural control, managerial discretion, and cultural reinforcement.

The observed practices also align with the behavioral reinforcement theory, which suggests that employee behavior is shaped through a system of rewards and punishments (Mukrodi, 2022). While sanctions were consistently applied in both cases, the absence or weakness of reward mechanisms in the private organization appears to hinder the internalization of discipline among employees. This imbalance potentially reduces motivation, as also noted by Wahyuni and Lubis (2020), who emphasize that fair reward systems are essential for long-term behavioral change.

Additionally, Rivai and Sagala (2013) argue that discipline should evolve beyond compliance into an internalized value system supported by a conducive organizational culture. This study supports that view, revealing that in both organizations, leadership behavior—particularly role modeling and consistency—plays a significant role in shaping the perception and effectiveness of disciplinary enforcement. However, while the public institution is more aligned with formalism and regulation, the private sector tends to rely on pragmatic and immediate enforcement strategies. This difference illustrates the contextual dependency of discipline implementation, further validating the importance of organizational culture in determining the success of HR interventions (Puspitasari et al., 2021).

Practically, these insights call for sector-specific approaches. For private organizations, it is essential to complement sanction mechanisms with structured, transparent reward systems that acknowledge consistent discipline and exemplary behavior. Recognition, whether through financial bonuses or symbolic appreciation, is a key motivator that fosters voluntary adherence to norms (Fitriani & Tresnawati, 2024). Furthermore, training programs for supervisors in empathetic and consistent enforcement can help bridge the gap

between policy and practice, improving fairness and communication clarity (Vandiarini et al., 2022).

In the context of public institutions, challenges remain in ensuring that formal disciplinary frameworks are supported by proactive leadership and effective monitoring. Bureaucratic rigidity often hinders timely responses to disciplinary violations. Thus, public sector managers should focus on streamlining internal processes, reinforcing accountability mechanisms, and integrating participatory leadership styles to promote greater employee ownership of workplace discipline (Simatupang et al., 2021).

Across both sectors, it is evident that technological systems—such as attendance monitoring tools—are only as effective as the leadership culture and organizational support that surround them. Discipline cannot be sustainably enforced through systems alone; it must be nurtured through a balanced approach that combines procedural rigor with psychological engagement. Therefore, both private and public organizations are encouraged to design discipline systems that are not only procedurally sound but also perceived as just, communicative, and inclusive of employee voice.

5. Conclusion

This comparative study investigated the implementation and perception of employee work discipline in two contrasting organizational contexts: a private enterprise and a public institution in West Sumatra, Indonesia. The findings highlight that while both organizations recognize the importance of discipline in ensuring employee performance, their approaches to enforcement, monitoring, and leadership styles significantly differ.

In the private organization, discipline is implemented through technology-supported attendance systems and progressive sanctions yet lacks a structured reward mechanism. Leadership plays a decisive role, with personalized and discreet enforcement promoting mutual respect, although inconsistencies remain in application. In contrast, the public institution adopts a more formal and hierarchical approach, relying on national regulations and structured protocols. Despite this, gaps in monitoring and bureaucratic inertia present practical challenges, revealing the limitations of formal regulation without active leadership support.

A key theoretical implication is that effective discipline depends not solely on rules or sanctions, but on how these are embedded within organizational culture, reinforced by leadership behavior, and perceived by employees as fair and meaningful. This study confirms that discipline is both a behavioral and relational construct—one that must be understood within the context of each organization's structure, values, and management capacity.

Practically, the study recommends that private organizations develop integrated reward systems to complement their sanction-based models and invest in leadership development programs that enhance consistency and empathy. For public institutions, greater emphasis should be placed on participatory leadership and more agile

disciplinary processes that do not solely rely on formal documentation but include proactive monitoring and coaching.

This research contributes to the field of human resource management by offering empirical insights into how discipline is enacted and experienced across sectors, highlighting the role of context in shaping disciplinary outcomes. However, the study is limited by its focus on only two organizations within a specific regional setting, suggesting the need for broader comparative studies across different industries and geographic locations.

Future research could expand on these findings by exploring the intersection between discipline and psychological contract theory, or by examining how generational differences influence disciplinary compliance and motivation in the workplace. By doing so, researchers and practitioners alike can deepen their understanding of how to build more responsive, human-centered, and performance-oriented disciplinary systems.

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