


Positive Reinforcement

The best way to change any work behavior.

 By Aubrey Daniels

Ability to positively manage change is widely recognized as essential to success, both personally and professionally. At work, this may involve how you acclimatize to new leadership, or adhere to new policies, or achieve new goals and meet new deadlines. The new year may have brought new pressures to modify behaviors to effect positive change.

So, while managing individual change seems within your control, why do most people still struggle with change? And what if the change that is needed is within your corporate culture? How do you as a manager or leader contribute to achieving sustained positive change that leads to others being engaged and giving their best every day?

The answer lies in understanding the [science of behavior](#). While you may think it requires a degree, it doesn't. But to achieve and sustain meaningful change, you must understand how what you say and do affects the behavior of others.

While most people think they know about behavior, most do not from a scientific perspective. What they know is from neighbors, family and friends or from popular books and bloggers. Knowledge of behavior from these sources is superficial at best and wrong at worst.

The average parent and business person hardly knows how to separate what is scientifically valid from what is just one person's experience. "Here's what worked for me" is probably the most-followed advice people receive about raising children to running a business and, more often than not, it isn't the best advice.

Let's start with the basics of the science. Without getting technical, *telling* doesn't change behavior, yet it is by far the most common way people attempt to change the behavior of others. People seem to think if they can just tell others in the right way to change what they are doing, that is all that is necessary. Since there is more to changing behavior than telling, the inevitable outcome of telling is that we get *louder, longer and meaner*. We say things like: "This is the last time I am going to tell you." "Why do I have to tell you three times before you pay me any attention?" "If I have to tell you again, you will be sorry!"

The closest thing to a law of behavior, as gravity is a law of physics, is "Behavior is a function of its consequences." When telling is highly related to consequences that are immediate and certain, telling is effective; when not, it is a waste of breath. It is important to know that threatening a consequence is not a behavioral consequence. It is just another way of telling. Training is mostly telling. You can't increase engagement with training. You can't change a culture by telling. It is not that telling is wrong; it is just that there is an over-reliance on telling as the solution, not as part of it. We plead, cajole, threaten and get emotional, but how often do we follow through? Rarely. Without consequences there will be no lasting change.

At work, consequences come from many places – the physical environment, the people, the policies and processes of work. However, consequences shape behavior only when they follow behavior. When productive behavior is followed by a consequence that is valued by the performer (R+), more productive behavior follows. When nonproductive behavior is followed by a consequence that is valued by the performer, more nonproductive behavior follows. While this

seems so basic that it is hardly worth mentioning, it is very common in business. Most bonus plans reward the good and poor performer alike. When corporate benefits are enjoyed by everyone, you can be sure that the poor performers are increasing their poor performance.

Another important factor is that we plan future rather than immediate consequences. We tell people: "Meet this goal, and you will be rewarded." "Work hard, and we'll discuss that promotion during your performance review." What we know about human behavior is that people respond better to smaller, frequent, immediate consequences than to larger, future, uncertain consequences.

This brings us to the culture change issue. Culture is described as the typical way we do things as a group. The group may be as small as a third shift work team or as large as all of Walmart. A culture is built one behavior at a time. A successful culture can only be built on positive reinforcement. While I write about that often, it is mostly misunderstood. It is the kind of thing I see with youth league sports, where everyone gets a trophy. They think they are using positive reinforcement, but they are not. There is more to it than the majority of the population understands. I have written six books on the subject. The problem is that when positive reinforcement is done wrong, it is almost worse than not doing it at all. If you are using positive reinforcement correctly, you have no need to change the culture. If you have a culture based on positive reinforcement, you don't have an issue of sustaining it, as people continue to engage in behavior that produces meaningful personal consequences. Blue Cross of Alabama has used positive reinforcement to sustain its positive culture for more than 33 years.

If you don't have a positive reinforcement culture and want to move to one, you do it by positively reinforcing productive behavior. People are fully engaged in any activity that produces meaningful consequences. For me, there is a big difference between a "positive culture" and a *positive reinforcement-based culture*. The goal at work is not to be positive but to increase valuable behavior through the use of positive consequences. There is a big difference between the two.

Any change is easy if you understand behavior from a scientific perspective. It is clear that the best way to change any work behavior is through knowledgeable use of positive reinforcement. Changing culture and engagement level and sustaining these improvements all yield to positive reinforcement. People seek positive reinforcement. It's in the genes. Do it correctly, and there will be no resistance. Do it incorrectly at your peril. Resolve to learn and apply the science of behavior (behavior analysis) in your work and your life. You, and all you meet, will be glad you did. **LE**



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