BACK TO THE BASICS IN TRAINING AND DEVELOPMENT

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ABSTRACT

To survive and prosper, organizations are interested in enhancing human performance, spending $55.3 billion on training and development in the U.S. in 1995 (Trends, 1996). However, many methods are little more than fads, false panaceas, or wishful thinking, and as such are destined to reap only sporadic gains and produce frustration. Alternatively, it is suggested in the present paper that the Law of Effect, first presented in 1911, offers a proven way out of managerial confusion. Problems with and potential solutions common to many management situations are offered by referring back to this basic principle.

I. INTRODUCTION

There once was an chicken farmer who scratched out a reasonable living from raising his chickens and selling both chickens and eggs. One morning when he went to feed his flock, he noticed several dead chickens. Not knowing what to do, he packed his bags and made a long trek into the Himalayas, climbed a mountain, and asked a guru.

"Oh guru," he moaned, "I am a poor chicken farmer. The other morning, I discovered several dead chickens. What should I do?"
"What do you feed them?" asked the guru.
"Wheat, I feed them wheat."
"That is your problem, my son. Corn! Feed them corn."
The man paid his tribute to the guru, climbed down the mountain, and journeyed home. When he arrived, he immediately changed the chickens' feed to corn. For three weeks, everything was fine. Then one morning, as he went to feed his flock, he found more dead chickens.

He packed his bags, made the trek back to the guru and cried, "Oh, guru! More of my chickens are dead!"
"How do you give them water?" asked the guru.
"In carved wooden bowls."
"Troughs! You need troughs!"
The farmer made the long trip home and built troughs. For six months, everything was fine. Then one morning, as he went to feed his flock, he found more dead chickens. So, again, he made the trek to the guru. "Oh guru" he said. "More of my chickens are dead!"
"How do you house them?" asked the guru.
"I built a wooden shack in which they live."
"Ventilation! They need more ventilation!"
Back home, the farmer spent a small fortune putting a new ventilation system
in his coop. For a year, everything went well. Then, one morning, he went out to
discover that all of his chickens were dead.

Beside himself with grief, he packed his bags and again made his way to the
mountain. "Oh, guru!" he wailed. "All of my chickens are dead!"

"That's a shame," replied the guru. "I had a lot more solutions."

This story mirrors the search for effective management strategies by
American managers. Training and development professionals are frequently being
given solutions to make their organizations more effective. Common sense
generalizations and panacea-like prescriptions appear regularly in the training and
development literature. Management experts and theorists spew practical advice that
ostensibly makes sense. Motivated by increasing criticism from all quarters, many
managers are so desperate to improve their operations and "save their chickens" that
they are willing to try anything to make improvements, whether it can be expected
to have a genuine effect or not. They find themselves flooded with so many new
approaches, and are so busy attempting to apply them to their working environment,
they have no way of determining which strategies are effective and which are not.

II. A PRACTICAL APPROACH FOR MANAGERS

Fortunately, there is an approach which provides an alternative perspective
for scientifically studying and influencing behavior. This body of knowledge is
nearly 90 years old and is based on the premise that behavior is primarily a
function of its consequences. The embodiment of this method is Thorndike's Law
of Effect, which says, "of several responses made to the same situation, those which
are accompanied or closely followed by satisfaction (reinforcement)... will be more
likely to recur; those which are accompanied or closely followed by
discomfort (punishment)...will be less likely to occur" (Thorndike, 1911, page 244).

Most behavioral and management researchers and practitioners
generally accept the validity of this law. It is both well understood scientifically and
obvious in everyday life, on the job and off. The Law of Effect is grounded in social
and behavioral science theory and in a multitude of reliable research
results. It has been demonstrated time after time in highly controlled experiments
and is directly observable in all walks of life.

Behavior can be changed in two ways by what comes before it and by what
comes after. When one tries to influence behavior before it occurs, one is using
antecedents. An antecedent is something that comes before a behavior that
encourages one to perform. Some of the common antecedents used in management
are goals, objectives, priorities, accountabilities, policies, procedures, standards, meetings, and rules (Daniels, 1989). All of these are intended
to communicate what is expected of individuals. While such prompts are
constructive in starting behavior, it is what comes after behavior that maintains and
supports performance.

In spite of the simplicity of the Law of Effect, one can utilize its implications
to help supervisors manage people. Frequently, managers are bewildered because
their employees do not do what they are supposed to. The fact that people perform
as they do because of what happens to them after they do it, makes it easier to
understand why people increase the frequency of behavior if a positive consequence is given after each time they perform it. A behavior that results in a pleasant experience is more likely to be repeated. Likewise, behavior that results in an unpleasant experience is more likely to cease.

This concept is enormously useful to the nonscientist, especially if applied systematically. Because the impact of a particular consequence on the rate of a behavior can be observed and altered, managers and supervisors can learn how to influence any behavior; and the main job of managers and supervisors is to influence behavior.

A word of caution: managerial-subordinate interactions are complex, as are all human interactions. Although the Law of Effect seems simple, the combination of: multiple reinforcers and punishers in real-life, difficulty of identifying specific relevant behaviors and consequences, and the different levels of emotional involvement by managers and workers in given situations may produce undesired or unpredictable results. If managers are to use the Law of Effect productively, some nuances must be explained.

III. EVERYONE’S BEHAVIOR MAKES SENSE TO THEM

Supervisors will go a long way in effectively influencing behavior of their employees if they understand that every person's behavior makes sense to them. Everyone is reinforced in different ways. Initially, what is reinforcing to one person may not be obvious, but if one looks a little deeper, one can discover the consequences that maintain almost any behavior. Supervisors must be willing to figuratively go around the desk and see the situation from the viewpoint of their employees, each employee. Remember that a consequence is positive or negative only as perceived by the receiver of that consequence. If love and attention are a positive consequence to a worker and there is not much of that happening, then any attention, even an admonishment, may be seen as a positive consequence. Attention is a powerful reinforcer even if it is chastisement.

IV. THE IMPORTANCE OF MANAGERIAL BEHAVIOR

The most important factor influencing an individual's on-the-job behavior often is the manager's behavior. Most people at the managerial level are concerned with those things that will please or anger their own immediate superior, and their behavior reflects this concern. To change the behavior of all supervisors, one merely has to bring in a new manager. Candid employees may admit that they act differently working for the new manager than they did for the predecessor. Yet, most people and, particularly, most managers seldom recognize the dramatic impact of their own behavior on that of their subordinates. We are often more readily aware of the influence other people have on us than we are of the influence we have on them.
V. COMMON MANAGERIAL PROBLEMS AND SOLUTIONS

Lack of Positive Consequences for Performing: In this situation the performer does something and nothing happens. Eventually, the individual stops performing. The behavior of interest is said to "extinguish." Most managers feel that doing nothing has no effect on performance. The fact is that when managers do nothing following employee performance, they change that performance by decreasing the probability of its reoccurrence.

Consider the following example. From the performer's point of view, will the indicated behavior be likely to continue? "I worked late last night to finish a report, but when I gave it to my boss this morning, she didn't even look up from her desk."

Obviously, an absence of positive consequences or rewards appears to exist to the performer in each of the above instances. But many managers feel getting paid is sufficient reward. Unfortunately, the weekly or semi-monthly paycheck does not qualify as a reward that influences people's performance. The psychologist B.F. Skinner, once observed, "People don't come to work to get paid, they come to work so the pay doesn't stop" (cited in Fournies, 1988, page 33). Too often managers fail to respond to positive worker action, exactly the behaviors they want to see in the future.

Rewards for Not Performing: Employees may not be doing expected behaviors because failing to do so is rewarded. Many managers reinforce nonperformance unconsciously on a regular basis, such as: Employees who do difficult tasks poorly are given only easy tasks to perform.

To correct this problem, make it pay off only when workers perform as desired. People respond to consequences whether they are aware of them or not. Do not reward employees for nonperformance. When employees make errors, they should be required to correct their errors. Assist as necessary, but do not correct the errors for them. When employees complain repeatedly about the work assignment that is assigned fairly and is unavoidable, ignore the complaints. Give verbal rewards, however, when the work assignment is performed correctly.

Punishment for Doing What is Expected: Research shows that people tend to behave less frequently when the behavior is followed by punishment. The most common reason people do not do as they are expected is simply that the desired "doing" is punishing. The following example shows appropriate performances followed by punishment: the employee who does difficult work well is assigned all of the difficult work.

The conclusion can be drawn that people will fail to do some things just to avoid punishment. If punishment continues in these situations, employees will avoid doing what management wants of them. Punishment must be replaced with what employees perceive as rewards.

No Negative Consequence for Poor Performance: Sometimes supervisors do not ask certain employees to submit reports because the employees refuse to write reports, complete them late, or poorly. When an employee complains and protests that he or she is given a special project, some supervisors avoid giving that employee special projects in the future because it is not worth the hassle. Other supervisors feel that affirmative action requirements keep them from doing anything
negative to poor performing minorities, females, 40 year-olds and over, and other "protected" groups. Some supervisors give average or even above average performance ratings to below average workers because they refuse to be the one to put a black mark in employees' records. These examples depict workers who are not performing, in part, because there are no negative consequences to them for poor performance.

VI. CONCLUSION

Although management in the past has relied on quick fixes and what ever is currently in vogue in the training and development area, the need for long term behavior management techniques with a proven track record as embodied in the Law of Effect are sorely needed. Utilizing this deceptively simple principle, managers and supervisors can better understand why employees do not perform as expected and why others do. Concrete, corrective actions can be taken to assist the former in changing in the desired ways and maintain good performance of the latter. These goals can be accomplished without periodically vacillating between the hill of one guru or another.

VII. REFERENCES

