Influence Employees the Right Way

BY C.W. VON BERGEN, BARLOW SOPER, AND KITTY CAMPBELL

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY
There is a strong tendency for managers and supervisors to blame employees for employee performance problems. Certainly, employees may not have the knowledge, skills, motivation, or aptitude to perform effectively, but managers should consider the possibility that they themselves may be contributing substantially to employees’ inadequate performance. The law of effect suggests that managers should examine their own behavior when questioning the causes of poor employee performance.
Managers seldom recognize the dramatic impact their actions have on subordinates. The same supervisors who admit they themselves are different under a new manager still minimize the impact they have on those below them. We are often more readily aware of the influence other people have on us than the influence we have on others.

Given the importance of supervisory behavior on subordinate performance, supervisors would do well to practice mirror management — before blaming employees for inadequate performance they should first examine how their own behavior may have contributed to the problem.

Managers influence employees
Managers influence employee behavior in two ways: by what comes before the behavior (the antecedent) and by what comes after it (the consequence). Antecedents get us going and consequences keep us going.

An antecedent is a person, place, thing, event, or situation coming before a behavior that encourages one to perform that behavior. (Behavior in a general sense includes overt actions, thoughts, and feelings.) Some of the more common antecedents used in business are goals, objectives, priorities, accountabilities, policies and procedures, standards, meetings, and rules.

Antecedents are intended to communicate what is expected of individuals. Most supervisors attempt to manage performance by telling people what to do, often in many different ways. Employees are told, asked, and cajoled to work harder, smarter, and better. Supervisors send memos and e-mails, write policies, outline procedures, conduct meetings, and develop goals and action plans, as well as establish deadlines, targets, standards, quotas, and budgets. They conduct training programs and hold classes, give monologues and have dialogues, and sometimes impart words of wisdom in eloquent, inspiring speeches while delivering impassioned pleas for increased effectiveness and efficiency.

Increasing the quantity of change messages is ineffective; what is called for is qualitative change of behavior.

Telling people what to do, in its many and varied forms, is an antecedent, and antecedents merely set the stage for behavior to occur. Even though antecedents happen before behavior, they do not maintain behavior once it has begun. Hence, antecedents have limited control over what employees actually do. The role of an antecedent is to encourage a behavior to occur initially or, at best, a few times. Effective antecedents are necessary to initiate performance, but they are not sufficient to sustain performance.

While prompts may be useful in starting behavior, it is what comes after the action that maintains and supports performance. The second way of influencing employee performance — and by far the more effective — is through consequences that follow behavior and alter the probability of that behavior recurring. Employee behavior is a function of contingent consequences: People do as they do because of what happens to them when they do it. That is, consequences cause behavior to occur more or less often in the future.

Consequences include such things as sincere verbal praise for a job well done, a monetary bonus for outstanding performance, smiles and pats on the back for excellent work, feedback about performance, jelly beans, and gold stars. A reprimand for coming in late for work, a demotion for poor accomplishments, and taking back gold stars for disruptive behavior are also consequences. Even doing nothing is doing something! Ignoring behavior, both positive and negative, is probably the most common example of doing nothing. Managers change behavior by inaction as well as action. If nothing else, doing nothing gives tacit approval of negative or undesirable actions and minimizes the importance of appropriate ones.

Success in business is dependent on lasting, consistent performance. Yet, much management activity is heavily invested in antecedents. As the old saying goes, after all is said and done, more is usually said than done. By looking in a systematic way at all significant antecedents and consequences, particularly consequences associated with a given behavior or performance, we are often able to gain a useful perspective on why people do as they do and develop ways to help promote, encourage, and maintain change.

The law of effect
The law of effect, formulated nearly 90 years ago, provides the key to influencing behavior through consequences. The vast majority of behavioral and management researchers and practitioners generally accept the validity of this law. The law of effect states that any behavior followed by a pleasurable consequence will occur more frequently, and behavior that is followed by an aversive consequence will occur less frequently.

A consequence is positive or negative only as interpreted by the receiver of that consequence. Supervisors must
be willing to consider situations from the viewpoints of their employees. And each employee will tend to have a somewhat differing perspective on any given situation. Managers must be willing to walk in employees’ shoes and see circumstances through others’ eyes. Failure to grasp employees’ perspectives results in an ongoing series of misinterpretations and misunderstandings, often followed by deterioration of the relationship and even poorer performance.

Take an example with which most people are familiar. You have probably witnessed a situation where a child was misbehaving on purpose, with the result that the child received some kind of reprimand or physical punishment. Afterwards, you or the other adults involved might have wondered why a child would appear to want to be punished. Meanwhile, the child may have walked away rubbing the spanked area, but thinking “They still care enough to notice what I do.” Remember that a consequence is positive or negative only as perceived by the receiver. A child who doesn’t routinely get any attention may see an
things up by punishing good performance, rewarding bad behavior, and ignoring both good and bad — and even the ugly.

**Common problems and solutions**
What is needed is an increased emphasis on appropriate contingent consequences for suitable performance. The following four scenarios illustrate what happens when managers do not use appropriate consequences or use consequences incorrectly, causing them to lament that employees don’t do as they are supposed to do. Note in these situations how frequently managers could have improved the situation by closely examining how their own behaviors may have contributed to employee performance problems. A look in the mirror would have been very helpful, indeed.

**Scenario 1: Lack of positive consequences for performing.** In this situation the performer does something appropriate and nothing happens. Eventually, the individual stops performing. The behavior of interest is said to “extinguish.” Most managers feel that doing nothing does not affect performance. The fact is that when managers do nothing after successful employee performance, they change that performance by decreasing the probability of its recurrence. From the perspective of the law of effect, doing nothing after performance decreases the probability of that action happening again. Consequently, doing nothing does something. If an employee does something good — exceeding a goal, for example — and the supervisor does nothing, you can be sure that the employee’s future performance is likely to decline.

Consider the following employee behavior that continually recurs is being reinforced and rewarded and employee behavior punished or ignored by a supervisor will disappear. Unfortunately, many managers foul things up by punishing good performance, rewarding bad behavior, and ignoring both good and bad — and even the ugly.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Monetary reinforcers</th>
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<tr>
<td>Promotion</td>
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<tr>
<td>Paid days off</td>
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<td>Company stock</td>
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<td>Company car</td>
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<tr>
<td>Pay for sick days not taken</td>
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<td>Pay for overtime accumulated</td>
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<tr>
<td>Tickets to special events</td>
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<tr>
<td>Free raffle or lottery tickets</td>
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<tr>
<td>Extra furnishings for office</td>
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<tr>
<td>Gift certificates</td>
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<td>Dinner for family at nice restaurant</td>
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<td>Personalized license plate</td>
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<td>Business cards</td>
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admonishment as a positive consequence. Attention can be a powerful reinforcer even if it is chastisement.

According to the law of effect, managers can influence employee behaviors by controlling the consequences that follow those behaviors. Corollaries to the law of effect suggest that employee behavior that continually recurs in the presence of a manager is being reinforced and rewarded by that manager, and employee behavior punished or ignored by a supervisor will disappear. Pretty simple stuff, right? Unfortunately, many managers foul things up by punishing good performance, rewarding bad behavior, and ignoring both good and bad — and even the ugly.
comments. 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 at it.”
- “Six months ago I gave my supervisor a workable suggestion for improving the assembly process and saving money, but I haven’t heard anything from him since.”
- “Since my boss warned me about shortages, I make a special effort so my cash drawer balances each day, but my boss never notices.”
- “You work your tail off around here and no one cares.”

An absence of positive consequences or reinforcers appears to exist to the performer in each of these instances. But many managers feel getting a paycheck is sufficient reward.

Unfortunately, the weekly or semi-monthly paycheck does not qualify as a reward that influences people’s performance. The famous 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.” What is implied is that there had better be reinforcers other than money if work is going to get done on a day-to-day basis. In addition, one’s paycheck is too far removed from day-to-day, moment-to-moment job activities to be a significant influence on them.

Managers frequently fail to respond to positive worker action, even if it’s exactly the behavior they want to see in the future. People who work the hardest and do the best are ignored because many times their supervisors are spending time and energy dealing with problem performers. All else being equal, over time, performance falls to a level just high enough to avoid punishment. The failure to reinforce productive actions is a common consequence in business, creating many performance problems.

Positive consequences should be delivered frequently for good performance. Specific examples of verbal reinforcers include:

- “I noticed you put in some extra time last night to complete this report on time. I really appreciate it.”
- “Thank you for limiting your discussion to the agenda material in today’s staff meeting like I asked. Your cooperation helped the meeting go much quicker.”
- “You consistently put forth so much effort to make your work accurate, I thought you should have the first new computer in the department.”
- “You work hard and succeed at meeting our deadlines, I would like to take you to lunch today.”

Scenario 2: Rewards for not performing or for inappropriate behavior. Employees may not be doing expected work activities because failing to do so is rewarded. Many managers reinforce nonperformance or inappropriate behavior unconsciously on a regular basis, and they do so with the best of intentions.

Everyone has overheard a parent telling his child that if she stopped crying he would buy her an ice cream cone. If you think about it, what is being reinforced is stopping crying. To stop crying, the child must have started crying. The child comes to realize on some level that when she wants ice cream she should start crying. There is a subtlety in understanding the effects of consequences. The parent is not stupid for not realizing this; he has just not fully understood how his actions have influenced the child’s behavior.

Consider business-oriented examples. Suppose an employee who does not like to work weekends becomes disruptive during weekend shifts. If the supervisor remedies the problem by taking the employee off weekend work, the supervisor has shown the employee (and other employees) that the way to get what you want is to be disruptive. This supervisor has unwit-
tingly rewarded poor performance.

In a more subtle situation, an employee was known to be self-deprecating and the manager wanted to eliminate this behavior. The employee frequently used such phrases as, “I can’t do that as well as you” and “I’m sure am bad when it comes to adding figures.” The manager, thinking it appropriate to build the employee’s self-esteem, typically responded, “No you didn’t, Pat” or “That was a fine job.” Why is the employee self-deprecating? Because people, especially her manager, reward that behavior.

Again, we get what we reinforce. The manager has followed his subordinate’s self-deprecating response with a reinforcer of verbal praise, increasing the probability that the subordinate will engage in similar unwanted behavior in the future. Indeed, the manager has probably decreased the subordinate’s self-confidence and increased her dependency on others. A more effective response would be silence, or merely ignoring the response and addressing a different topic. This alternative — failing to acknowledge the unwanted behavior — would decrease the probability of its recurrence. The subordinate would stop making self-deprecating responses if the manager stopped reinforcing her.

The road to hell is paved with good intentions. A manager can destroy a subordinate’s confidence by giving her reassurance and concern when she is self-deprecating. A valid objection might be raised that people need reassurance and concern when their behavior indicates they are frightened, upset, or lacking in confidence. It is not concern per se that is important. What is important is when concern is shown. To follow self-deprecatory behavior with a show of concern is to reinforce and increase the probability of that response. It is better to tell the person she handled a situation well and did a fine job after she actually performed well.

Other examples of inadvertently reinforcing poor performance or inappropriate behavior include:

- When employees make errors, the boss corrects them.
- Employees who do difficult tasks poorly are given easy tasks.
- Employees who are difficult to control receive job assignments giving them a lot of freedom.
- Employees who perform poorly receive a lot of attention from the boss, who behaves as a therapist.
- A department manager recommends bad employees for promotion rather than good ones because the manager cannot run the department without the good performers.
- The employee who has a problem with an assignment (or does not want to do it) goes to the supervisor, asks for help, and leaves the problem and the assignment for the supervisor to complete.

What do you think the consequence will be in each of these examples? What will co-workers learn from observing these situations?

To correct this problem, provide payoffs only when workers perform as desired. People respond to consequences whether they are aware of them or not. Do not reward employees for nonperformance. Do not play amateur psychologist; keep discussions relative to job performance. When employees make errors, they should be required to correct their errors. Assist as necessary, but do not do the job for an employee even if it is easier at the time. When employees complain repeatedly about work that is fairly assigned and unavoidable, ignore the complaints. But give verbal rewards when the work assignment is performed correctly. Be wary of reverse delegation. Managers and supervisors are there to assist employees, but employees are responsible to do their job, solve their work problems, and grasp opportunities.

**Scenario 3: Punishment for doing what is expected.** Research on the law of effect shows that people tend to behave well 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 action is punished.

Consider the following example: Suppose a computer programmer who writes clear documentation is frequently asked by her supervisor to write documentation for other programmers. If the programmer prefers doing other tasks (say, writing programs), being asked to write more than her share of documentation would be an aversive consequence to doing this task well. This is especially true if other programmers get to write less documentation as a result. Therefore, the programmer may change her behavior to avoid this consequence by writing documentation of poor quality in hopes of being assigned less of it.

Other examples of appropriate performances followed by common organizational punishments include:

- The employee who does difficult work well is assigned all the difficult work.
- The employee who makes excellent suggestions at meetings is assigned extra work to carry out the suggestions.
- The manager who does a good job and comes in under budget gets his budget cut, while the person who is over budget gets the same amount or perhaps even an increase.
- The employee who tries to be innovative hears the boss yell, “Why can’t you follow instructions like everyone else?”
- The boss always waits for late-comers to arrive before commencing meetings or repeats missed information, effectively punishing those who arrive on time.
- An employee who finishes a task early is told to help other employees who had not finished their work (some of whom were most certainly wasting time waiting for this to happen).

The adage that no good deed goes unpunished reflects the attitude among employees in many organiza-
tions that the likely result of appropriate action is negative consequences. Based on these examples, the conclusion can be drawn that people will fail to do appropriate things to avoid anticipated punishers. If punishment continues in these situations, employees will further avoid doing what is wanted. Punishment must be replaced with what employees perceive as rewards.

Scenario 4: No negative consequences for poor performance. Supervisors often do not ask certain employees to submit reports because the employees refuse to write reports, complete them late, or do them poorly. When an employee complains and protests that he is given a special project, some supervisors avoid giving that employee special projects in the future because they feel it is not worth the hassle.

Some supervisors initiate disciplinary action when an employee refuses to perform, only to get pressure from higher management, the human resources department, or the union representative suggesting the supervisor is being hard-nosed or vindictive, thus forcing the supervisor to back off. Other supervisors feel that affirmative action requirements keep them from doing anything negative to poor performing minorities, females, people over 39 years old, and other protected groups.

Some supervisors give average or even above-average performance ratings to below-average workers because they refuse to be the ones 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 inadequate performance. In such situations employees believe, and rightfully so, that their performance does not really matter or affect their lives.

These deplorable situations require that supervisors provide negative consequences for poor performance, for example:

• When an employee who has a desirable work location is performing badly, assign that person to a less desirable location.
• When a poorly performing employee refuses to improve, demotion may be an appropriate step in a progressive disciplinary system.
• If an employee is demoted because of performance, reduce that person’s salary.
• Bad performance should dictate denied or delayed raises.
• And if an employee still fails to improve after a manager has attempted coaching and other interventions to produce change, it’s time to terminate the employee.

The point is not to threaten and punish employees continually (which is what poor managers do), but to give problem employees negative consequences for continued nonperformance.

An important cautionary note: It should be understood that the rules leading to both positive and negative consequences must be clearly defined, disseminated in advance, and consistently administered in order to influence employee behaviors predictably. This means that rules and consequences of behaviors have to be ones that matter and that are genuinely willing to enforce every day with all employees. To do otherwise shows that the rules do not count or do not apply to everyone.

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Limited impact on performance of a single consequence. An occasional reinforcer at work will make only a small difference in performance. That is why yearly performance appraisals, annual recognition dinners, quarterly bonuses, and employee of the month contests have little or no impact on organizational performance. To provide a perspective on the importance of frequency, in The Technology of Teaching, B.F. Skinner states that it may take as many as 50,000 reinforcers to teach competence in basic math — roughly the first four grades.

In conclusion
The need for long-term behavior management is sorely needed. Using the simple principles embodied in the law of effect, managers and supervisors can better understand why some employees do not perform as expected while others do.

An important first step is for man-
agers to invest the necessary time and energy to look in the mirror and reflect upon which employee behaviors they are rewarding and punishing. Too often, managers respond to an immediate crisis or a personal problem without considering the long-term impact of their actions. As a result, situations develop in which productive employees are either ignored or punished while less productive employees are rewarded.

The law of effect suggests that if a behavior is followed by a pleasant experience, then the person will probably repeat the behavior. If the behavior is followed by an unpleasant experience or by no response at all, then the person is less likely to repeat it. Consequently, employees who perform according to management's expectations should receive immediate and frequent rewards, thus positively reinforcing appropriate behavior that has been performed. Employees who do not perform according to expectations should receive unpleasant consequences for their inappropriate behavior. Not only will this arrangement result in desirable behavior in the individual employee, it will also help to create a culture in which it is clearly understood that high performing, productive employees will receive desirable rewards.

For further reading