EJM, Volume 14, Number 1, 2014

ISSN: 1555-4015

EJM

European Journal of Management™

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Volume 14, Number 1, 2014 ISSN: 1555-4015

LAISSEZ-FAIRE LEADERSHIP: DOING NOTHING AND ITS DESTRUCTIVE EFFECTS

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ABSTRACT

*The **sine qua non** of laissez-faire leaders is that they do nothing. Despite many managers' belief that doing nothing does not impact performance, managers change employee behavior by their inaction as well as their action. Management nonresponse to desirable or undesirable employee performance changes future worker behavior for the worse. Some managers seem incapable of expressing their gratitude and appreciation to those employees who perform well and act as if their feedback philosophy should be one of "no news is good news." Conversely, some supervisors hesitate to challenge employees needing corrective counseling and appear to endorse a "see no evil, hear no evil, speak no evil" management approach. Both practices lead to poor performance and supervisors who do nothing substantially damage their firms. Firms pay a high price for supervisors who do nothing.*

"To do nothing is within the power of all men."
— Samuel Johnson

Keywords: *Laissez-Faire, Leadership, employee*

1. INTRODUCTION

One of the key responsibilities of leaders includes monitoring and responding appropriately to the performance of subordinates (Yukl, 2006). This is important since research strongly demonstrates that worker performance is a function of supervisory consequences to that behavior and that worker conduct can be maintained or increased by contingent rewards and reduced or eliminated by contingent punishment (Hinkin & Schriesheim, 2008; Luthans & Kreitner, 1985).

Laissez-faire leaders, however, are those individuals who occupy leadership positions but have abdicated the responsibilities and duties assigned to them (Lewin, Lippitt, &White, 1939). More recently, Judge and Piccolo (2004) indicated that that leaders who scored high on laissez-faire leadership scales avoid making decisions, hesitate in taking action, and are absent when needed, while Antonakis, Avolio, and Sivasubramaniam (2003) and Bass and Avolio (1997) have identified laissez-faire leadership conduct as avoiding responsibility, not responding to problems, being absent when needed, failing to follow up, resisting expressing views, and delaying responses.

Laissez-faire leaders provide basic but minimal information and resources. Understanding of job requirements, policies, and procedures are generally exchanged from employee to employee. Little direction and focus is given and if there are goals and objectives, employee agreement or commitment is just assumed. Even if goals and objectives are shared, rarely is there a defined plan to accomplish them (Goodnight, 2004). Laissez-faire leaders essentially do nothing and this omission or nonleadership has negative consequences for firms (Skogstad, Einarsen, Torsheim, Aasland, & Hetland, 2007).

Yet a common assumption among most managers is "that doing nothing will have no effect on performance" (Hellriegel & Slocum, 2007, p. 103) and that "no news is good news" (Hinkin & Schriesheim, 2008, p. 1246) suggesting that managers' nonresponse to good and poor performance has no effect on affective responses (e.g., job satisfaction) or future behavior. Nevertheless, when supervisors do nothing following worker behavior they often demotivate good performers and encourage poor workers. Those who practice "if you don't hear from me you know you are doing fine" (Hinkin & Schriesheim, 2004, p. 365) may be doing more harm than they suspect.

This is because research demonstrates that subordinates in work organizations may be as sensitive to the reinforcement that they do *not* receive (but may want or feel that they deserve) as they are to the rewards and punishments that they *do* receive (Pithers, 1985). When managers do nothing following employee behavior, they change that performance for the worse in one of two ways: 1) they decrease the probability of future *desired* behavior, and 2) they open the door for increased levels of *undesired* performance. This paper explores the high costs to organizations when laissez-faire leaders fail to recognize or reward effective employee conduct as well as when they neglect or ignore worker wrongdoing followed by a discussion of the consequences of such nonresponse and ways of addressing such inaction. The paper concludes with implications for managers.

2. MANAGEMENT NONRESPONSE TO *DESIRABLE* EMPLOYEE PERFORMANCE

Über management consultant and author Tom Peters stated that successful leaders and companies should "Celebrate what you want to see more of'" (Peters, n. d.). Great organizations create greater success by praising and celebrating; i.e., by positive reinforcement. Recognizing achievements and milestones boosts pride, camaraderie, and leadership credibility. By providing occasions to acknowledge, recognize, and reward meaningful accomplishments, leaders create a culture where progress and appreciation prevail.

Laissez-faire leaders who withhold reinforcement (e.g., praise), whether intentionally or unintentionally, may very well produce negative consequences. This finding is supported in studies by Hinkin and Schriesheim (2008). Additionally, Howell and Costley (2006) and Komaki (1998) noted that nonreinforced subordinate good performance leads to negative subordinate affective and behavioral responses, and Skogstad et al. (2007) found that when a superior ignores legitimate expectations from subordinates by lack of presence, involvement, feedback, and rewards, such behaviors may negatively influence subordinates' role experiences.

Management attention is a major positive consequence for the vast majority of the work force (Daniels, 1994), and if missing, then extinction may unintentionally occur which means that the productive behavior will decrease because it was overlooked. While extinction can be technically defined as the withdrawal of positive reinforcement from a behavior previously rewarded (Luthans & Kreitner, 1985), the concept may be easier to understand as a condition in which "the performer does something and nothing happens" (Daniels, 1994, p. 29). When people do something good resulting in no reinforcement, they will be less likely to repeat that behavior in the future or, as Skinner (1953) pointed out, "... when we engage in behavior which no longer 'pays off,' we find ourselves less inclined to behave that way again" (p. 69). "Just ignore it, and it'll go away" (Daniels, 1994, p. 62) is basically how extinction works. A good analogy for extinction is to imagine what would happen to a person's houseplants if they stopped watering them. Like a plant without water, a behavior without (occasional) reinforcement eventually dies and disappears. In each case, the behavior decreases because reinforcing consequences no longer occur. These examples show that doing nothing after someone behaves properly and positively can weaken and eliminate that worthy behavior. Failing to recognize good performance can become a silent killer—like escalating blood pressure.

3. THE EFFECTS OF DOING NOTHING ON DESIRABLE BEHAVIOR

What is killed, of course, is continued good performance. This is because management attention is a major positive consequence to the vast majority of the work force (Daniels, 1994), and if missing, then extinction may unintentionally occur which means that the productive behavior will decrease because it was overlooked.

While extinction can be technically defined as the withdrawal of positive reinforcement from a behavior previously rewarded (Luthans & Kreitner, 1985), it may be easier to understand as a condition in which "the performer does something and nothing happens" (Daniels, 1994, p. 29). Just ignore it, and it'll go away is basically how extinction works.

A good analogy for extinction is to imagine what would happen to a person's houseplants if they stopped watering them. Like a plant without water, a behavior without (occasional) reinforcement eventually dies and disappears. In each case, the behavior decreases because reinforcing consequences no longer occur. These examples show that doing nothing after someone behaves properly and positively can weaken and eliminate that worthy behavior.

Positive Reinforcement

If managers want desirable behavior to continue they must reward and reinforce it. This is a well-known finding that has been documented by numerous researchers (e.g., Daniels, 1994). Nevertheless, it is a common supervisory misperception that they are frequently, and adequately, rewarding their employees. Many managers believe they are providing abundant recognition to their followers and say, "I use positive reinforcement all the time" (Daniels, 2001, p. 67) yet when their employees were asked when they last received positive reinforcement from the boss, the most common answer by far was "I can't remember" (Daniels, 2001, p. 67). Managers think they recognized their subordinates but worker perceptions differ—and it is workers' perceptions that matter most!

At an organizational level several recent studies have shown a strong link between employee recognition systems and firm success. For example, a study surveying 26,000 employees in 31 healthcare organizations found that companies in the top quartile of employee responses to the item " My organization recognizes excellence" outperformed companies in the bottom quartile on this response in their return on equity, return on assets, and operating margin by a factor of at least three-to-one (Gostick & Elton, 2007). In another study, Welbourne and Andrews (1996) reported that for 136 companies which engaged in an IPO, those that emphasized the use of employee rewards had over a 40% higher likelihood of survival 5 years later than did companies which did not highlight employee rewards. It appears, then, that the success of a firm depends on supervisors' recognition of deserving performers and that many performance problems may be created by what supervisors don't do.

Management Nonresponse To *Undesirable* Employee Performance

While good performers should receive managerial attention, a firm's poor performers deserve lots of attention too—perhaps even more than their productive coworkers. Most employees want to do a good job at work; nevertheless, there are some problematic workers and as organizations look to redirect their efforts, it is often necessary to provide negative sanctions with the expectation that the recipients of this feedback will expend efforts to improve questionable performance. Regrettably, most supervisory personnel are reluctant to provide negative feedback to others and the discussion of poor performance is apparently so aversive that it is often neglected (Landy & Farr, 1980) frequently leading to future, more serious problems.

For instance, Pope John Paul II's legacy includes a belief among some of the faithful that he failed to deal adequately with not only allegations of sexual abuse by priests, but also with bishops who transferred clergymen to new assignments rather than confront the issue (Breen, 2011). Consider likewise the supervisors of Army psychiatrist Major Nidal Hasan, who is charged with killing 13 and wounding 43 soldiers at Fort Hood in November 2009. Despite appraisal records which described him as unprofessional, erratic, and disturbing to both his colleagues and his patients, the Army promoted Hasan. Some argued that the failure to discipline him for his troubling behavior undoubtedly led to the catastrophic violence at the Texas army base (Mulrine, 2010). Equally distressing was the failure of Penn State University officials, notably Head Coach Paterno, who either avoided asking difficult questions or chose to look the other way and not act on reports of an assistant coach's child sexual abuse. This inaction allowed the predator to walk free for nine years enabling him to target new victims (Simon, 2011).

In business contexts many managers often ignore or do not confront problematic staffers. For instance, a survey of 5,500 employees found that forty-four percent of respondents believed their firm's management too lenient on under-performers, and that managers should confront slacking employees sooner and more often (Trends, 1988). A more recent survey asked employees if their managers confronted poor performers and only 31 percent of respondents indicated that their manager challenged them (Sunjansky, 2007). Most often managers who continually overlook such workers hope the problem will disappear and that those employees will somehow turn themselves around or stop their troublesome conduct. Left to fester, however, bad behavior patterns often lead to project delays, expense overruns, and missed deadlines costing firms millions in lost productivity and revenue. Ignored negative behaviors do not typically go away—they multiply when leaders fail to act because the behaviors are then assumed to be "accepted by leadership" (Thornton, 2011). Unfortunately, too many leaders seem to emulate famous English author Rudyard Kipling's *Shut-Eye Sentry* who while on duty would "... shut my eyes in the sentry box, so I didn't see nothin' wrong" (2006, p. 362).

4. THE EFFECTS OF DOING NOTHING ON UNDESIRABLE BEHAVIOR

The impact of ignoring *undesirable* behavior is different than overlooking *desirable* behavior. As indicated above, disregarding desirable behavior is tantamount to behavioral extinction and thus decreases in effective performance occur. Ignoring undesirable behavior, however, generally tends to maintain or increase ineffective and inefficient conduct. Indeed, Luthans and Kreitner (1985) have argued that nonresponse to poor subordinate performance may not extinguish the undesirable behavior and will do nothing to elicit the desired behavior (Petrock, 1978). This could be because the wrongdoing is often self-rewarding or reinforcing to a worker and involves an activity the person already finds intrinsically satisfying. For instance, an employee who steals money from a firm experiences the naturally occurring positive consequence associated with having more money. As indicated earlier, behaviors that are positively reinforced tend to be repeated. Similarly, if workers are taking shortcuts in the safety area the naturally occurring positive consequences associated with doing a job with often less time and effort will regularly cause the undesirable behaviors to continue and increase. This is because the safe behavior may be typically less comfortable, convenient, or efficient than some at-risk shortcuts.

Supervisory silence about wrongdoing is often interpreted as subtle acceptance and consent (from the Latin maxim, 'Qui tacet consentire videtur' ['He who is silent seems to consent']) and consequently such nonresponse may act as an unintended reinforcer for the behavior they do not want (Daniels & Daniels, 2004). Failing to address performance issues may also lead employees to believe their performance to be at satisfactory levels because management neglects to tell them otherwise (Tata, 2002). By directly and objectively confronting a worker's problematic behavior, supervisors clearly show the wrongdoing to be unacceptable (Seidenfeld, 1998).

Negative sanctions. Particularly problematic behavior occurs when people do things that are illegal, immoral, unethical, unsafe, unhealthy, or unfair to themselves or others that cannot be ignored or allowed to continue (Daniels & Daniels, 2004). These behaviors often have devastating effects on organizations and must be stopped. Immediate corrective action entailing punishment or penalty may be necessary. Such consequences, effectively used, do have a place in management. They are intended to diminish or stop undesirable employee behavior.

However Baron (1988) found that it was generally not the delivery of negative feedback, *per se*, that produced such unconstructive outcomes as increased levels of conflict, resentment, and aggression, but rather the manner in which supervisors conveyed such information that seemed to play the crucial role. Baron (1988) observed that performance discussions about poor performance using constructive criticism (specific, considerate, feedback that does not contain threats of termination or reassignment, or suggestions that an individual's poor performance results from negative internal attributions such as the person being stupid or lazy) did not generate strong feelings of anger and tension nor increase recipients' tendency to adopt ineffective techniques for dealing with poor performance (e.g., making endless excuses, refusing to change). Furthermore, Ilgen and Davis (2000) forcefully argued that giving negative feedback carries with it a responsibility to convey the message in such a way that will not adversely affect the probability that the person will perform better in the future. Clearly, managers should engage in constructive suggestions with their poorly performing subordinates regarding how they might improve their future behavior.

Such conversations may be particularly important because ignoring bad behavior invariably culminates in disillusionment from the very people the business relies most upon—those who consistently produce good results. Research by Schnake and Dumler (1989) supported this view and found that supervisors who fail to discipline others' inappropriate behavior is perceived as punishment by those performing at high levels and that leaders who punish unwanted employee behavior is frequently viewed as rewarding by these high performers. Moreover, employees generally feel better about their supervisor, coworkers, and opportunities for advancement when their leaders hold employees accountable for poor performance.

This finding confirms research by Carlsmith, Darley, and Robinson (2002) which showed that people believe individuals should get what they deserve in life and that they tend to be more satisfied when others receive punishment or penalties that are contingent upon low performance or unacceptable behaviors.

Of all the nonactions likely to negatively impact a team's morale, none appears quite as damning as a supervisor's failure to respond promptly to a team member's poor performance. In a review of 32 management teams, Larson and LaFasto (1989) found that the most consistent and intense complaint from team participants was team leaders' unwillingness to confront and resolve problems associated with poor performance of individual team associates: "more than any other single aspect of team leadership, members are disturbed by leaders who are unwilling to deal directly and effectively with self-serving or noncontributing team members" (p. 83). Moreover, O'Reilly and Puffer (1989) found that subjects in their studies reported that they were more willing to work hard, felt more satisfied, and perceived more equitable treatment from their supervisors when they punished poorly performing team members than when such individuals received no reprimand. These findings suggest that individuals observe and respond to rewards and punishments given or not given to others.

The impact of social contexts. Bandura's social learning theory (1986) posits that people learn from one another, via imitation, modeling, and by observing the consequences that others experience following their behavior. The failure to use negative sanctions may, therefore, reinforce unproductive norms as individuals learn, for instance, that it is permissible to arrive late, work at half speed, or that slipshod quality is acceptable. Conversely, social learning theory suggests that individuals are less likely to engage in modeled behavior if they perceive that there will be punishing effects than if they anticipate positive outcomes. Properly applied, negative sanctions may act both to set specific goals and to help establish group norms which govern acceptable and unacceptable behaviors.

Failure to use negative sanctions may, from a social learning perspective, act as a reinforcer for undesired behaviors, lead to feelings of inequity, and establishment of unproductive group norms. In part this could be because when misconduct occurs, observers expect that the violators will be punished (Hogan & Emler, 1981). In a social context, then, the use of negative sanctions may be a highly effective tool for increasing both productivity and satisfaction (O'Reilly & Puffer, 1989). It seems that the observed tendency of managers to avoid the conflict inherent with the use of punishment (O'Reilly & Weitz, 1980) may result in a failure to use discipline resulting in feelings of inequity, loss of motivation, and lowered commitment and cohesiveness among productive group members (Podsakoff & Todor, 1985).

Managerial inaction to address an individual's unfavorable performance has significant implications for a workgroup. At least at first, group members may look to their leader to punish a deviant group member (Butterfield, Treviño, & Ball, 1996) but poor leadership may allow a negative person to persist in their destructive activity. If the supervisor does not address this behavior, then those ineffective performers may serve as models for antisocial behaviors that can infect the whole group (O'Fallon & Butterfield, 2011). The common idiom "a bad apple spoils the barrel" captures the core idea of negative individuals having deleterious effects on others (Sember & Sember, 2009). Bad apples distract and drag down everyone, and their destructive behaviors, such as anger, laziness, and incompetence, are remarkably contagious. Felps, Mitchell, and Byington (2006) noted that groups having a bad apple performed 30% to 40% worse than similar groups without a bad apple. Furthermore, employees are more likely to model caustic behavior of others if they must work closely with them in order to do their job. This is noteworthy given that task interdependence is growing as organizations move toward the use of self-managed work teams and decentralized organizational structures (Erez, LePine, & Elms, 2002). Thus, a negative side effect of such increased interface is that it enhances the likelihood that problematic behavior will be socially contagious requiring that managers act quickly to limit such actions before they spread to others.

Supervisors are obligated to confront wrongdoing. Ignoring certain kinds of unwanted behavior can be especially problematic. For example, the Occupational Safety and Health Act's most basic provision, the "general duty" clause, requires that the employer "furnish to each of his employees employment and a place of employment which are free from recognized hazards that are causing or likely to cause death or serious physical harm to his employees" (29 U.S.C., 1976). There is a duty of care to ensure, as far as reasonably practical, that workers and others are not exposed to risks of health or safety arising from the conduct of the employer's business. In the workplace, "the duty of care addresses the attentiveness and prudence of managers in performing their decision-making and supervisory functions" (Palmiter, 2006, p. 192). Leaders who do not address such harmful action will be seen as condoning it and may also be held responsible for unsafe practices and employees may bring legal action against the supervisor and firm for not taking the proper action to secure a safe workplace. Courts in these cases usually find for the employee (Daniels & Daniels, 2004).

Any act of discrimination should also be dealt with immediately. Sexual harassment, a form of sex discrimination, receives much attention in the workplace and properly so. Such behavior can have serious consequences to persons being harassed and to organizations as well. These firms often suffer damaged employee morale, lost productivity, costly law suits, and public relations nightmares because of organizational inaction or a lack of taking immediate action (Peirce, Smolinski, & Rosen, 1998). Indeed, the U. S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission's (1999) long-standing guidance on employer liability for harassment by coworkers assumes employer liability if the employer knew or should have known of the misconduct, unless it can show that it undertook reasonable care to prevent and promptly correct harassment.

Another area where non-responsive leadership may be problematic involves the failure to appropriately discipline. Consider the case of *Andrews v. Fowler* (1996) in which plaintiff Andrews claimed being raped by Officer Fowler. Plaintiff alleged the chief of police and mayor knew of several prior allegations of sexual misconduct involving Officer Fowler but failed to discipline him. Plaintiff alleged that this failure was essentially ratification of Officer Fowler's misconduct and stood as evidence that the "official policy" of the city became tacit authorization of Fowler's sexual misconduct. The court held that supervisors may be subject to individual liability for failing adequately to receive, investigate, or act upon complaints of wrongdoing by department employees if they: 1) received notice of pattern of unconstitutional acts committed by subordinates; 2) demonstrated deliberate indifference to or tacit authorization of offensive acts; 3) failed to take sufficient remedial action, and 4) such failure proximately caused injury.

Finally, the legal theory of negligent supervision appears to be gaining ground. Negligent supervision is the plaintiff's claim that he or she was injured as a result of the employer's failure to adequately supervise an employee (Fitzpatrick, 1994). To state a claim for negligent supervision, a plaintiff must prove they suffered an injury due to the employer's failure to reasonably monitor or control the actions of an employee for whom defendant had a duty to supervise (*Abate v. Circuit-Wise, Inc.*, 2001). As this theory becomes more understood and applied, organizations would be wise to examine instances of possible negligent supervision involving managers who do nothing (Arsenault, Jessup, Hass, & Philbrick, 2002).

5. ADDRESSING MANAGERIAL INACTION

Lack of supervisory response gives rise to the perception that there are no consequences to performance which leads problem employees to continue pushing the envelope while good workers become further discouraged. Thus, frequent, positive consequences must be delivered by leaders to those responsible for successfully carrying out the mission of the organization and discipline to those who do not.

Perhaps the best way for this to occur is to recognize that people who are positively reinforced by their manager are more likely to positively reinforce their direct reports in turn. The leader's behavior flows down to lower level subordinate supervisors. In an environment where the leader uses positive reinforcement as a style of working with workers, that style is also imitated. An interesting and important point is that while managers will absorb some of the punishment they receive from their bosses, they will actually give more positive reinforcement than they receive (Hinton & Barrow, 1975). This results in a culture where individuals feel empowered and committed, and where they form supportive relationships with their peers and managers which results in higher levels of performance, both individually and collectively. An effective leader celebrates the efficient, effective, legal, moral, and ethical *ordinary*. If he or she celebrates only extraordinary behavior, by definition this will be a rare event and is unlikely to give people sufficient guidance and motivation for their daily work (Daniels & Daniels, 2005).

On the other hand, when leaders find ineffective practices, it is advisable to look first to the systems and the processes for an explanation. If multiple people engage in ineffective practices, the cause is most likely to be in how their work was structured. The most effective remedy is usually to change the consequences for common ineffective practices rather than to punish the performers. If a large number of people are abusing some policy or participating in some other undesirable or unproductive behavior one may properly assume that they are acting rationally given the system in which they find themselves, rather than individuals involved in undesirable behavior having some character flaw.

Moreover, it is advisable for managers to seek input from their direct reports on how their behavior is impacting them. Leaders must be open to such feedback and need to practice mirror management (Campbell, Von Bergen, Soper, & Gaster, 2003); that is, before blaming employees for inadequate performance supervisors should examine their behavior and proverbially look in the mirror and see how their own conduct may have contributed to problem situations. Indeed, in many organizations, the consequences managers deliver are counterproductive because supervisors regularly reinforce poor performance (e.g., when employees make errors, the boss corrects the mistake) or punish good conduct (e.g., the employee who does a good job and comes in under budget this year gets his or her budget cut next year). Thus, the image a supervisor sees in the mirror may not always be flattering. While the manager may not recognize this reflection as his or her own, this is merely a perceptual error.

This is why it is important to analyze unacceptable or chronic poor performance from the perspective of the followers and not just devise new methods of punishment for undesirable performance. Punishing someone for behavior that was created by actions or decisions of the leader inevitably leads to a less loyal workforce. It is certainly not the case that the individual performers are never at fault, but it is important to understand the origins of problem behaviors. Faulty facts or data lead to defective decisions and inappropriate consequences. Supervisors who do nothing contribute to poor performance, whether they realize this or not.

6. CONCLUSION

Abundant evidence indicates that employee behavior is a function of its consequences. People do what brings praise and positive reinforcement and avoid what doesn't. Good performance will probably decline unless acknowledged while bad behavior will likely continue or perhaps increase if not addressed. Leaders who do nothing exhibit what Hinkin and Schriesheim (2008) and Judge and Piccolo (2004) call laissez-faire leadership or nonleadership which has substantial negative effects. Such leadership behavior is toxic. We agree with Avoilo (1999) who noted that laissez-faire leadership is "poor, ineffective leadership and highly dissatisfying for followers" (p. 55).

Effective managers exhibit both reward and disciplinary behavior towards subordinates (Arvey, Davis, & Nelson, 1984) and let people know where they stand by recognizing good behavior and correcting those who may be off track. They give ongoing support, guidance, and instruction to those who need improvement and they are not hesitant to confront poor performers. They do not shirk a leader's primary responsibility which includes ensuring that employees continually perform at desired levels. They correct problems when they occur, not after they have been ignored for so long that they have become disasters. Overlooking the situation and hoping that things will improve is a recipe for disaster. Hope should not be considered a business strategy (Froschheiser, 2010).

7. IMPLICATIONS FOR MANAGERS

A number of implications for managers can be summarized. First, in any type of situation, effective leadership depends on reinforcing, motivating, and rewarding value enhancing behaviors in order to spur superior performance. The vast majority of leaders in organizations, however, believe they are doing so but subordinates tell a different story. Supervisors are thus encouraged to err on the side of providing too much positive reinforcement and to offer more frequent, specific, and personal recognition to employees. Something as simple as a pat on the back can represent a meaningful incentive (Nelson, 1994), and so managers must not feel constrained by budgetary concerns, but rather only by their own imagination.

Second, managers must ensure an appropriate relationship between employee behavior and supervisor consequences. This refers to the idea of contingency. In applying contingent reward and discipline, effective leaders intervene in response either to good or to poor performance. The general finding remains that *both* leader contingent reward and punishment behaviors are positively associated with employee attitudes, perceptions, and behaviors beneficial to organizations. Both contingent rewards *and* punishments administered to workers based on performance or task behaviors reduce role ambiguity and improve employee satisfaction, effort, conscientiousness, and performance, although contingent punishment to a smaller extent than contingent reward. Additionally, contingent reward and punishment behavior promotes *group* drive, cohesiveness, and productivity, although again punishment effects appear weaker than contingent reward behaviors.

A third implication is that supervisors must realize that because of their inaction, bad conduct typically continues and in many cases escalates as well as spreads to others in the workgroup. When ignored, little things often turn into big things. To decrease such unwanted behavior, punishment may be administered. However, only after a supervisor determines—perhaps through a process similar to Mager and Pipe's (1984) analyzing performance problems—that an employee does not have a skill or ability deficiency (perhaps because of a lack of training), or that there are obstacles beyond the employee's control such as inadequate equipment, should discipline be administered. If an employee can perform but does not, then correction may be required. Effectively used discipline does have an appropriate place in management but if supervisors only punish what they do not want and do not reinforce what they desire, improvement is unlikely. Thus, supervisors should reinforce behavior incompatible with unwanted behavior (e.g., staying at a work station vs. taking excessive breaks).

Fourth, managers should do their best to address problematic behavior and avoid delivering destructive criticism to subordinates. The costs of doing so, in terms of lowered employee motivation and increased conflict, may be very costly. It is recommended that leaders clarify the specific behaviors that are being punished and why, be considerate and respectful, ask the employee what further resources he or she needs to effectively do their job, and clearly specify what the employee should do in the future. These guidelines are designed to correct a problem or modify ineffective behaviors and are not intended to embarrass or ridicule workers.

Finally, it may be well to remember management guru Peter Drucker's keen observation that "The manager directs people or misdirects them. He brings out what is in them or he stifles them.... Every manager does these things when he manages—whether he knows it or not. He may do them well, or he may do them wretchedly. But he always does them" (Drucker, 1954, p. 344). Drucker seemed to focus on managerial action but as demonstrated in this paper managerial *inaction* also significantly influences workers. Most managers seldom recognize the dramatic impact of their own failure to act on their subordinates and that many performance-related problems are created not only by what they do but also by what they don't do.

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