MIRROR MANAGEMENT

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ABSTRACT

There is a strong tendency for managers and supervisors to blame their employees for employee performance problems. Certainly, employees may not have the knowledge, skills, motivation, and/or aptitude to perform effectively but it would behoove managers to consider the possibility that they themselves may be contributing substantially to their employees' inadequate performance. Using the Law of Effect as the operating guideline, this paper examines the importance that a manager's behavior can have on an employee's performance. The principles identified in the Law of Effect suggest that managers should examine their own behavior and proverbially look in the mirror when questioning the causes of employee behavior and what to do about it.

I. INTRODUCTION

Poor performance is a fact of life in organizations. According to (Viega, 1988), "If there is one universal truth about managers, it is that all of them have problem subordinates" (p. 145). There are many reasons for subordinates' inadequate performance but a major factor is supervisors' own actions. Very little is as potentially rewarding or aversive as others' actions and, like it or not, the most important factor influencing individuals' on-the-job behaviors is that of their managers (Thompson, 1978). Most people are deeply concerned with those things that will please or anger their immediate superior, and their behavior reflects this concern. To change the behavior of all employees, one merely has to employ a new manager. Candid employees might even admit that they act quite differently working for the new manager than they did for the predecessor (Daniels, 1994).

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

II. INFLUENCING EMPLOYEES: ANTECEDENTS AND CONSEQUENCES

Managers influence employee behavior in two ways: by what comes before the behavior and by what comes after it (Daniels, 1994). The technical term for what comes before a behavior is antecedent. The word for what comes after a behavior is consequence (Martin & Pear, 1999). Antecedents get us going and consequences keep us going.
A. ANTecedents

When one tries to influence behavior before it occurs, antecedents are being used. An antecedent is a person, place, thing, event, or situation coming before a behavior that encourages one to perform that behavior (in all instances we define behavior in a general sense to include: 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 (Daniels, 1989). 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 or 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.

Telling people what to do, in its many and varied forms, is an antecedent. 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 are not sufficient to sustain performance.

B. CONSEQUENCES

While prompts may be useful in starting behavior, it is what comes after the action that maintains and supports performance. Thus, the second way of influencing employee performance and, by far the most 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 (Luthans & Stajkovic, 1999). 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, hugs and kisses, gold stars, and in the case of the speed sign noted earlier, a patrol officer giving tickets to those individuals who exceeded the posted limit. 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. Management changes behavior by its inaction as well as its action. If nothing else, doing nothing gives tacit approval of negative or undesirable actions and minimizes the importance of appropriate ones.
III. THE LAW OF EFFECT

The Law of Effect, formulated nearly 90 years ago (Thorndike, 1913), 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: "without a doubt the Law of Effect or principle of reinforcement must be included among the most substantiated findings of experimental psychology and is at the same time among the most useful findings for an applied psychology concerned with control of human behavior" (Vroom, 1964, p. 13). 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.

According to the Law of Effect, managers can influence employees' behaviors by controlling the consequences that follow those behaviors. Two corollaries to the Law of Effect suggest: 1) any behavior by an employee that continually recurs in the presence of the manager is being reinforced/rewarded by that manager and, 2) an 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, as well as the ugly.

IV. COMMON MANAGERIAL 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 them incorrectly, thus causing themselves to lament why their employees do not "do as they are supposed to." 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.

A. 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 (Daniels, 1994). 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 (e.g., exceeding a goal, target, or quota) and the supervisor does nothing, you can be sure that the employee's future performance will be likely to decline.

Managers also frequently fail to respond to positive worker action, exactly the behaviors 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 necessary only to avoid punishment. The failure to reinforce productive actions is a common consequence in business, creating many performance problems.

B. REWARDS FOR NOT PERFORMING

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 do so with the best of intentions, never giving what they are doing a second thought. Managers should provide payoffs only when workers perform as desired. When employees make errors, they should be required to correct their errors. When employees complain repeatedly about work that is fairly assigned and unavoidable, ignore the complaints. Give verbal rewards, however, when the work assignment is performed correctly. Be wary of reverse delegation. Managers and supervisors are there to assist employees, but make sure that everyone understands that it is still their job to do problem to solve, opportunity to grasp, or responsibility.

C. PUNISHMENT FOR DOING WHAT IS EXPECTED

Research on the Law of Effect 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 action from the employee's perspective is punished. The adage, "No good deed goes unpunished," reflects the attitude among employees in many organizations that the likely result of appropriate action is negative consequences for those who do them. 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.

D. NO NEGATIVE CONSEQUENCES FOR POOR PERFORMANCE

Supervisors many times 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 they feel it is not worth the hassle. Some supervisors initiate disciplinary action with an employee who refuses to perform only to get pressure from higher management, the human resources department, or the union representative suggesting that 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, those 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
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.

III. ORGANIZATIONAL ERRORS

While the major focus of this paper is on individual managers and supervisors, it should be noted that organizations should also periodically look in the mirror to examine the consequences they deliver. This is because organizations often have reward systems that are inappropriate in that the types of behaviors rewarded are those which need to be discouraged, while desired behaviors are not being rewarded at all. In his classic article entitled "On the Folly of Rewarding A, While Hoping for B," (Kerr, 1975) provides numerous examples of reinforcement mistakes organizations make.

V. CONCLUSION

Although supervisors in the past have relied on quick fixes and whatever management techniques were currently in vogue, the need for long-term behavior management is sorely needed. Utilizing 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 managers 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, problems 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 the 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.

REFERENCES
Available upon request.