PUNISHING GOOD PERFORMANCE

C. W. Von Bergen, Southeastern Oklahoma State University

Barlow Soper, Louisiana Tech University

Lawrence C. Minks, Southeastern Oklahoma State University

ABSTRACT

Managers sometimes inadvertently punish their employees for good performance and should consider the possibility that the reward and punishment systems they are using result in employee behavior opposite of what they want. Several examples of such good deeds being punished are offered and solutions recommended.

I. INTRODUCTION

When managers or administrators are asked why employees don't do what is desired their replies frequently include: "Because they are not motivated," "They don't want to," "They don't care," "They're lazy," "They are stupid," and so on and so forth (Fournies, 1988). Managers often indicate that many of the reasons for such nonperformance lay with their employees. However, managers who complain about lack of motivation in their workers or why employees don't do what they're supposed to might do well to consider the possibility that the reward and punishment systems in effect are paying off for behavior other than what they are seeking.

One such strategy managers apply that causes non-performance is punishing desirable employee behavior. We have witnessed workers in organizations frequently punished for doing what is expected and have labeled this practice the "No good deed goes unpunished" effect.

What manager in his or her right mind, you ask, would punish employees for good performance? The answer is that many managers do it routinely as an unconscious act. Examples in which desired performance is punished are everywhere. Sometimes the source(s) of punishment is highly visible, and sometimes they are more subtle. Here are a few examples:

- The person who does difficult work well is assigned more and more difficult work.
- One of the authors was in the military and in basic training noted that those soldiers who cleaned their rifles quickly and did a good job were required to clean the rifles of others.
- Students who complete assignments early are given additional assignments, or the assignments are changed at the last moment.
- The time of those who arrive promptly is wasted at meetings waiting for latecomers.
• The person who makes a suggestion at a meeting gets the extra work of carrying out the suggestion.
• When professors tried to get students involved in research for credit they were required to submit forms and formal proposals which took half the academic term for approval.
• Managers frequently send poor performers to career enhancing advanced training instead of more productive workers because the latter are deemed more essential to the operation of the work group. Unfortunately, when promotion times arrive the excellent performers are passed over because they lack advanced education and training while the less productive employees are advanced.

In each of these examples the individual was doing something desirable: completing difficult assignments, finishing projects early, attending meetings on time, contributing ideas in discussions, attempting to involve students in research, doing a job quickly and competently. And yet, in each case from the individual’s perspective he or she probably felt that they were being punished. In time one could see why an employee might be late with projects and late to meetings, not offer ideas or do shoddy work. Such behavior could lead the supervisor to wonder why employees don’t do what they are supposed to. Managers who complain about lack of motivation in their workers and disappointing performance should consider the possibility that their behavior is punishing their employees and resulting in behavior opposite of what they want. These unintended consequences appear to challenge recent research suggesting that managers punishment practices are logical, deliberate, and systematic (Butterfield, Trevino, & Ball, 1996).

It is an axiom in the behavioral sciences that people do what they do because of what happens to them when they do it (Daniels, 1994). Based on the above examples, it is clear that people will fail to perform to avoid what they perceive as aversive consequences. Actions are defined and controlled by their effects. Managers will go a long way toward improving their leadership effectiveness if they will try to see the situation through the eyes of the employee and stop punishing positive behavior. At best these punishments should be replaced with rewards. Reward desirable behavior, don’t punish it.

If we believe that one of the key components of management and leadership is to influence behavior then we might consider a method that was formally identified some 85 years ago and has passed the test of time. This approach is based on the premise that behavior is primarily a function of its consequences and that people do what they do because of what happens to them when they do it.

This proposition was first put forth in 1913 by psychologist Edward Thorndike. He called it the Law of Effect. It was appropriate then and, in our opinion, it is applicable today. This strategy encourages leaders to pay particular attention to the outcomes employees receive for engaging in selected behaviors.

II. LAW OF EFFECT

“When a modifiable connection between a situation and a response is made and is accompanied or followed by a satisfying state of affairs, that connection’s strength is increased: when made and accompanied or followed by an annoying state of affairs,
its strength is decreased" (Thorndike, 1913, p. 4)

Yet, leaders still do otherwise! To minimize inappropriate and sabotaging consequences managers should give positive consequences or reinforcers to those who perform. Hence, punishment must be replaced with what is to be perceived as rewards by the employee. Rewards increase behavior, punishment inhibits behavior. How long would you remain a manager if your paycheck was replaced with a beating?

Likewise, do not reward employees for nonperformance or poor performance; there must be negative consequences to the employee with continued nonperformance or poor performance. By considering the Law of Effect managers can better understand why employees may not perform as expected and take corrective actions. Simple ideas to be sure, but not always easily put into practice when scheduling, shipping, production, or accountability concerns are pressing.

When employee performance is subpar rarely do managers indicate that they, themselves, did something wrong. Such myopia seems to be an integral part of human nature and has been referred to as the "fundamental attribution error" (Greenberg & Baron, 1997); the tendency to blame performance difficulties of others on THEIR personality characteristics and traits such as lack of intelligence, laziness, carelessness, etc. while minimizing environmental and situational influences, including the impact the supervisor has on his or her employee performance.

**Substituting Rewards for Punishments**

Let us see how we could replace the punishments for good performance with rewards in the examples given previously. In the first two examples we had the common situation where a person who does good work is given more and more to do. Instead of punishing him or her with more work, it would make sense to give the producer some payoff such as an afternoon off or less work on the next project. Administrative objections might include: we cannot show favoritism, the work won't get done, etc. Each of these objections require a specific administrative response. Yes, such action will probably take more administrator time and effort at the moment, but like raising a child it is usually a situation of "pay me now or pay me more later." If the problem employees are dealt with immediately and they see that there are payoffs for compliance, instead of noncompliance, long term administrative workload will go down. Too often not only is the efficient performer punished, the shirker is rewarded. Both must change.

The third problem was the student who completes work early being punished by being given additional work or by having the assignment changed. The former complication may be remedied in much the same way as noted above for the first examples. However, we must make sure we are consistent in our assignments, and that they are well conceived and conveyed from the start to avoid last minute adjustments that negatively affect efficient workers. Before making a work assignment it is a good idea to be certain it is as needed and is workable. Again, we see that this requires special attention on the part of the person or persons in charge. If last minute changes are necessary it would be best to consider options beyond simply reassigning to the same person, such as dividing the burden among several workers if possible, or simply doing it oneself. Note, this is applicable where the
need to redo work is caused by changing assignments and not because of inadequate or sloppy performance by the worker.

Regarding the example of waiting to start work for the arrival of late employees, the remedy is straight-forward. Start and stop meetings on time. Do not waste everyone’s time waiting or rehashing missed material with late arrivals. Bring them up to speed outside the meeting, preferably at a time that is inconvenient for the ones who arrived late, such as over an anticipated lunch hour or break. Explain why it must be done at that time. This not only rewards those who are on time, it has the benefit of making late attendance penalize the individuals involved.

The fifth vignette involves punishing people for making suggestions by assigning them the implementation of ideas they offered at meetings. This management practice is a good way to stifle creativity and group/team input because people quickly learn to keep quiet to avoid adding extra tasks and responsibilities to their already busy work schedules. To remedy this punishing state of affairs a manager should praise the individual contributor for his or her creativity and then solicit help to work on the details of the idea. The manager should assist the volunteer in developing a quality product and then reinforce the person for their extra effort. In most cases managerial time and attention is a potent reinforcer (Daniels, 1989). Any other number of rewards may be appropriate and is limited only by the creativity of the manager. Additionally, numerous books are available to aid managers in rewarding employees (e.g., Nelson, 1994). The key managerial behavior needed in this situation is to demonstrate that there are rewards for those people who make suggestions and those who implement the suggestions.

The sixth illustration noted the cost in time and effort to university faculty trying to comply with an administrative request that they get students more involved with research. When asking a favor, make sure to streamline the requirements to do the favor. Do not erect obstacles or people will ask why they should bother. Make it as easy as possible to comply, not difficult, and let those involved know that you are trying to facilitate their help. Then, reward them for doing so.

In the last scenario a manager sends a lesser performing employee to training and development activities rather than a more qualified effective performer because the supervisor can ill afford to do without the services of the higher performer. This example illustrates that managers frequently are more responsive to immediate, short-term consequences rather than longer term effects. Managers should understand that such behaviors tend to create long term dissent among the higher performing individuals and frequently result in work groups composed entirely of poorly motivated and performing employees. Managers who are known as people developers who positively reward good performers are able to maximize the performance of their employees and capture their discretionary effort (Daniels, 1994). Like the first two scenarios, this example indicates a situation of “pay me now or pay me more later.”

In conclusion, administrators and supervisors have considerable influence over the behaviors of their employees if they are willing to exert it. However, action must be taken in a thoughtful, well planned, and consistent fashion, one that treats everyone equitably, so that good performance is not punished and that EVERY
GOOD DEED GOES Rewarded.

III. REFERENCES


