From the Dark Side to the Bright Side: The Power of Social Reinforcement & Tips for Doing It Right

Janis Allen

Performance Leadership Consulting

INTRODUCTION

We know that punishment (temporarily) stops behavior that is undesired. However, punishment creates many unwanted side-effects. Punishment does not get a desired behavior started; it often produces alternate negative behaviors, avoidance of the person who gave the punishment, or misstating the truth or data in order to avoid receiving more punishment.

Positive reinforcement is by far the most productive use of consequences because it increases the frequency of desired behaviors and creates a more positive workplace where people are less afraid to take risks, try new solutions, and are more likely to be truthful about mistakes. Positive reinforcement can be given in the form of tangible (anything which costs money) reinforcers or in the form of social (non-monetary) reinforcers. Positive reinforcement is "pull" and punishment is "push". Positive reinforcement "draws" people voluntarily to perform the desired behaviors.

Tangible reinforcers can work effectively to increase desired behaviors, but often create unwanted side-effects: people come to expect money or something tangible when asked to reach a goal, employees compare the value of the reinforcers they receive with those received by another employee or other departments and may feel that they deserve more.

Social reinforcement, or non-monetary person-to-person positive reinforcement has fewer risks and is powerful to motivate positive employee behaviors. Social reinforcement can be given immediately after the desired behavior, and on a dramatically more frequent basis (even daily and hourly). It also builds positive relationships with co-workers.

Social reinforcement can be given in the form of:
- Speaking brief words of approval

- Listening to an employee's "success story" without interrupting
- Walking the work area to make eye contact, point to an employee's behavior or result, and smile
- Making a positive comment written on a report or graph, or a star drawn around a good result number

Emerson Electric's Orlando Engineering Center (Electronic and Space Division) designed equipment for military aircraft. For a radar indicator for the US Navy, the project team was tasked to dramatically improve that site's prior performance of budget overruns, missed deadlines, and re-work of designs after they went into production. Site management made the following five interventions:

1. They formed one interdisciplinary team consisting of nine design engineers and four production engineers, along with the supervisors of both areas. This was done to avoid past problems such as presenting the engineers' "finished" design to production, who then came back to them and said, "We can't make this work. You'll have to change the design."

2. Team members created budget graphs and milestone charts to track their work and communicate during the design process. This prevented errors and time delays during production and testing. The team tracked and updated its own expense graph weekly to stay within its weekly budget, including their own labor costs as well as materials costs. This made the team aware of the extra expense of their own overtime costs, and they worked to avoid those costs (at their own personal expense!).

3. To ensure on-time delivery, the team graphed its % actions completed on time, posted it in the work area, and reviewed each action during their weekly team meetings.

4. All members of the team (design engineers, production engineers, and supervisors) were given training on how to give social reinforcement for observed behaviors which would move their project toward its goals of:
   - On-time completion
   - Producing and testing a workable design within the budget
   - Producing a design which would be 100% reliable as measured by the specifications of the customer, the U.S. Navy

   In the social reinforcement training, the team members learned to:
   - Pinpoint peers' behaviors which would help to meet these three goals

- Tell the person what he or she observed and why it was important to meeting the goals
- Personalize the reinforcement (e.g., use private reinforcement rather than public reinforcement if that's what the receiver preferred)
- Use the co-workers' names, make eye contact, and smile while talking with them about the behaviors they were reinforcing
- Comment positively about good results, ask the co-worker how he or she achieved the results, and listen without offering "better ideas"

Using these reinforcement techniques, the team members gave peer-to-peer social positive recognition to each other privately on a day-to-day basis, whenever productive behaviors were noticed.

5. The team met weekly for 30 minutes. Team members took turns leading the meeting, where they reviewed the action items planned the previous week, and team members gave verbal social reinforcement for completion of tasks and data showing that the team was within its budget. No tangible (monetary) reinforcers were used.

6. When milestones were met, the group held short get-togethers to celebrate and talk about how they achieved the milestone goal.

The team cut costs by 75% compared with previous projects, delivered the product before the deadline, and proved that the radar indicator performed with 3 times the reliability of previous products manufactured by that facility.

In addition, some non-measurable benefits were achieved. Mary Norton, a team member from engineering design, said, "A major thing was to gain respect for my fellow workers. Previously, I just saw their mistakes. During this project, I learned about their knowledge and saw their dedication to build a product like this."

Production team member Don Wright commented, "In the past we had chaos. Production was not aware of the problems engineering had overcome in the design phase, what had already been tried. Then time was lost when the design didn't work as planned in production. The way we used the action list helped us because we all knew that we'd be reviewing our list at every week's team meeting, so it was a pretty good prompt to 'get on the stick' and get our tasks done. One big difference was that people actually volunteered to take action items, rather than waiting for the boss to tell them what to do."

Greg Leggitt, the mechanical design engineer for the project, said, "We had good communication because we began to expect that someone would say something positive about our ideas when we reported actions completed, and even when we identified a potential problem. No one was afraid to give input for fear of being criticized."

Asked what advice he would give to other teams, Eddie Brewer, the project manager said, "Keep the team small. We had only 13 people. This makes it easier to keep responsibilities sharply and clearly defined. We had 'a meeting of the minds.' That's the kind of meeting people actually like to go to."

(A version of his case study was originally published in Performance Management Magazine.)

More detailed information and case studies are available in the speaker's books I Saw What You Did & I Know Who You Are: Bloopers, Blunders and Success Stories on Giving and Receiving Recognition, and You Made My Day: Creating Co-Worker Recognition & Relationships (co-authored with Michael McCarthy).

THE AUTHOR

Janis Allen, founder of Performance Leadership Consulting (operating since 1991), is the former Vice President of Operations and Performance Management Consultant for Aubrey Daniels International. Her clients have included BMW Manufacturing, 3M, International Paper, Xerox, Kodak, Atlas Precision Manufacturing, Champion Credit Union, Columbia Forest Products, Crane Resistoflex Manufacturing, Department of the Army Finance & Accounting, Excelsior Packaging, First Light Solar, Monsanto Chemicals, Morganton Pressure Vessels, Philadelphia Electric, Quiagen Biotech, Stephens Federal Bank, Tektone Sound & Signal, Tindall Pre-stressed Concrete Manufacturing, United Airlines, Verizon Wireless, Volvo Construction Equipment, Wisconsin Gas, and Blue Cross/Blue Shield. Previously, Janis was a plant Human Resource Manager and Corporate Training Manager for Milliken Textile Manufacturing. She has a B.A. degree in Sociology from Furman University in Greenville, S.C. Janis was keynote speaker for the National Association for Employee Recognition (national conference). She presented workshops for Association for Manufacturing Excellence (Cincinnati 2015 and Boston 2017) on employee engagement, involvement, and motivation. Her book, I Saw What You Did and I Know Who You Are, has been widely used within Delta Airlines. She is the author of six business books: Performance Teams: Completing the Feedback Loop, Team Up, I Saw What You Did and I Know Who You Are, You Made My Day (with Michael McCarthy), How to Engage, Involve, and Motivate Employees (with Michael McCarthy), and Ready? Set? Engage! (with Michael McCarthy). Janis has also published a history book: World War II Veterans of Western North Carolina: Their Stories in Their Own Words. She is a past president of the Brevard Music Center Association and an executive board member of the Western North Carolina Military History Museum (both in Brevard, NC, where she lives).