Improve Employee Performance With Behavior Modification 

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**Identifying good and bad behavior is at the core of ensuring positive outcomes.**



An important part of every manager's job is to guide employees toward activities that will help them make progress in their jobs, and away from activities that will derail them and negatively affect the organization. Through feedback and an effective rewards program (which may include, in some instances, punishment), managers can assist employees in getting to the best outcomes for their own careers and contributing to the performance of the organization.

What it is

Behavior modification is a method for encouraging employees to behave in ways that are considered desirable, and discouraging them from behaving in ways considered undesirable. It involves the variation of consequences resulting from a target behavior (contingent consequences). Consequences that strengthen a behavior are called reinforcement; consequences that weaken a behavior are called punishment.

Positive reinforcement involves giving employees something they value, for example, praising them for a job well done. By contrast, negative reinforcement involves taking away something that employees do not like, such as taking away probationary employment status.

Punishment also takes two forms: creating a negative consequence for employees (for example, a manager reprimanding an employee for arriving late to an important meeting); or taking something positive away (for example, a manager taking away the employee's company car in the face of evidence that the employee used the company car, provided exclusively for business travel, for personal use).

Why it works

Behavior modification is based on the principles of operant conditioning developed by B.F. Skinner, who showed that behavior is a function of its consequences. People tend to repeat behaviors with favorable consequences and tend not to repeat behaviors with unfavorable consequences.

When a manager praises an employee for an excellent presentation, for example, the employee experiences this as a reward and will put time and attention into future presentations. However, if the manager appears to be displeased with the presentation and points out the information that was left out, the employee experiences this as a punishment and will try to put more effort and information into future presentations.

In some cases, however, the manager may have been happy with the presentation but was preoccupied and showed no response in the meeting, rushing out afterward without giving any feedback to the employee. This may be experienced as an unrewarding outcome and cause the employee to become discouraged. This could likely result in the employee putting less effort into future presentations.

Guidelines

Employees respond best to positive reinforcement (rewards). Rewards strengthen a behavior when employees see a strong connection between a specific behavior and a certain reward. To get the best results, managers need to clearly identify good performance in behavioral terms and reward those employees who engage in these specific behaviors.

To improve performance:

* Conduct training sessions to inform employees of the antecedents, behaviors, and consequences (see checklist) of the program. Identify a time frame and feedback methods.
* Give employees regular and helpful feedback as they embark on the process of behavior change.
* At the time specified, measure the target behaviors again and implement the program of rewards.

If outstanding customer service is the goal, a manager needs to tell employees what this looks like. Is it zero customer complaints in that quarter? Is it positive customer satisfaction surveys? What rating is considered positive on a five-point scale? Some managers may be happy with 4 out of 5 on the five-point scale, while others may only reward employees who receive 5 out of 5.

Another consideration is how to respond to employees who receive customer complaints each quarter or who fail to meet standards on a continuous basis. For such employees, the manager needs to move to punishment, starting with reprimands, and then moving to a write-up, and so forth.

Again, for punishment to be effective, employees need to see a strong connection between the behavior and the punishment. Moreover, the manager needs to work with these underperforming employees to help them see what they are doing wrong and what they should be doing instead. The poor behavior needs to be specifically identified and the employee needs to be redirected to another, more desirable behavior.

In addition to the type of reinforcement or punishment, attention needs to be given to its timing in terms of having an impact on behavior modification. Intermittent schedules of reinforcement (or punishment) can be based on a fixed or variable number of responses (ratio) or on a time period (interval).

Fixed-ratio and fixed-interval schedules of rewards and punishment are important when employees rely on the consequence—a great example is an employee's base pay. Eric is paid $2 for each unit he produces (ratio); Sarah is paid a salary for every two weeks of work (interval). When they were newly hired, these pay schemes motivated both Eric and Sarah to perform at their highest level. However, three years into their employment, they have each become accustomed to performing at a certain level and receiving a set amount of pay.

Their manager notices that for each, performance is at a plateau. At this time, it is necessary to layer in a system of intermittent rewards to boost performance to a higher level. The manager could set a challenging goal for Eric's department, with each employee who meets the production goal in that quarter receiving a bonus. For Sarah, the manager could praise her for her punctuality in getting things completed and give her movie tickets as a fun reward.

Results

Behavior modification has been shown to improve job performance, promote safe behaviors, reduce accidents, improve customer service, and assist employees in identifying and improving on a range of more functional behaviors in the workplace. For example, sales representatives have successfully implemented more effective sales techniques, manufacturing employees have raised their productivity levels, and customer service representatives have improved the level of support provided to customers.