COMMUNICATIONS

Oh, Behave!
The Secrets to Managing and Measuring Behaviours

BY CANDY TYMSON CSP

Do you have a colleague who is causing you angst at the moment? How have you been responding?

I was recently doing a project with a colleague who was very keen to please and consequently every time he saw me he started on the defensive—explaining what he had done and why—working very hard to justify his position. This was very time-consuming and frankly became quite wearing. I then tried a little experiment.

The next couple of times he walked into my office, the first thing I did was look up at him and smile. The change in his demeanour was miraculous! No justification, no defensive behaviours...the simple positive reinforcement of my smile was all it took to change his behaviour.

One of the well-recognised ways of changing behaviour is to use either reinforcement or punishment, but sometimes the outcomes aren't what are expected.

For example, many companies have used 'rewards' as a way of reinforcement—anything from movie tickets to a major cash bonus. But experience found that over time these special rewards become expected, and therefore lost their impact. There are also many examples of team members becoming more productive—simply because of a change in their environment. The surprise though is that the change could have been either positive or negative—it was the change, rather than what the change was, that created interest and therefore increased productivity.

So how can the modern day manager apply basic psychology to encourage desirable behaviours and eliminate undesirable ones?

Using Positive Feedback to Change Behaviour

As they say in the old song: 'accentuate the positive (in order to) eliminate the negative'. How often do you hear people saying—'no one seems to notice when we do something right—they only notice if we do something wrong and then all hell breaks loose!' The main problem with this approach (besides the fact that people don't generally feel appreciated) is that if they do do something wrong, they often are at great pains to hide their mistake—which can make things even worse.

So, that's the answer?

Do you remember the book *The One Minute Manager* by Kenneth Blanchard and Spencer Johnson? One of their approaches summaries the concept well:

'Help People Reach Their Full Potential—Catch Them Doing Something Right'.
 Here's how it works:
1. Catch them doing something right
2. Praise immediately—saying what they did right. Be specific
3. Tell them how it helps the organisation and other people working there
4. Encourage them to do more of the same
5. Smile and/or use appropriate touch to reinforce your support of them

Of course there are many forms of giving positive reinforcement. It could be material such as a pay increase, bonus, promotion or a better office; it could be verbal, phrases such as 'you've done a good job' or 'I appreciate your efforts on that project'; or non verbal such as a smile, pat on the back or other forms of attention.

It's well recorded that the more traditional approach of using negative consequences or even punishment to try to make behavioural change often doesn't work. For example, negative consequences could be material things such as the loss of privileges, a demotion, or pay-cut; or the use of negative verbal phrases such as 'don't you ever get anything right' or 'you're useless'. These techniques may make the boss feel better, but they have a negative impact on the person targeted. Finally, non-verbal communications such as frowning and shaking your head send very clear negative messages. Do these approaches work in generating a change in behaviour or do they simply build a sense of resentment?

Have you noticed that if someone gets negative feedback, they tend to blame others? In contrast, if they get positive feedback they tend to accept it, and take ownership of it.

Pinpointing Behaviour to Change It

If a behaviour is to be changed or modified, it must be possible to clearly identify it and measure it. It is easy to label behaviour; for example, to say someone is lazy, or disagreeable, but is that helpful when giving feedback? How can you measure laziness, or record if someone is being disagreeable?

It is only when you 'pinpoint' the behaviour you can actually measure it. So if someone is 'disagreeable' their behaviour could be pinpointed by the fact they argue and complain. Rather than saying someone is lazy, it is more measurable if you pinpoint their behaviour, for example, they don't initiate projects or check their work for accuracy.

Once someone's behaviour, either desirable or undesirable, has been pinpointed, then you have a tool to manage that behaviour—rather then relying on what may be seen as your own prejudges or perceptions of what is actually happening.

When people are given the list of expected behaviours, and how they are to be performed, then a meaningful appraisal of their performance can be made—and measured!

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