

BEHAVIOR: HOW TO GET WHAT YOU WANT

That pat on the back goes a long, long way

Ask yourself as the boss which is more important to you: having power or getting the job done profitably? If it's the former, stop reading. You'll deem this article to be a waste of your time. If you want to get the job done with some money to put in your coffers or pocket, this article might be worth the five minutes it takes to read.

Let's take one of those minutes to explore the foundations behind B.F. Skinner's theories on operant conditioning. Operant conditioning is a modification of *voluntary* behavior, and Skinner saw behavior has a function of environmental histories. In other words, our actions and behaviors are a result of what's happened to us in the past. Reinforcement is a consequence that causes behavior to occur with greater frequency. Punishment, on the other hand, is a consequence that causes behavior to occur with less frequency. Lastly, a behavior may also occur less frequently as the result of extinction. That is, it garners neither a favorable or unfavorable consequence.

So enough of the psychology primer on it, and besides, one minute's up. Feel free to follow up with your own investigation if you'd like. You may come to realize there's some real power in operant conditioning.

It really boils down to rewarding the behavior you want to see repeated. What about the punishment aspect? You probably already have an employee code in place regarding a host of infractions. Let that as it is and continue with its fair enforcement. What we're talking about here is the little daily stuff.

Focus on positive reinforcement. Let's face it, we all like a reward. Does it work? With continual application, it certainly does. But what's the reward? It can be just about anything that makes an employee feel appreciated: a verbal thank you, a written note, a dollar to drop in the vending machine, lunch, a balloon, a mention in the company newsletter.

It really doesn't matter what the recognition is, and it doesn't need to take a lot of time (and you'll find that the time it does take pays off in the end by having a motivated employee). What's important is that it's consistent.

We even had a plain, old rock that we passed around among co-workers (not just from the boss) with a note attached to it recognizing an employee's particular effort. Never once did someone receive the rock without it eliciting a smile and improving his or her day.

So go ahead and give it a try, and just ease into it at first. Start with verbal thank-you's and maybe a *written* thank-you on occasion. Get comfortable with that before launching some sort of more public recognition system. If you start by creating a lot of hoopla surrounding a recognition program, and it falls by the wayside, you would have been better off to do nothing in the first place.

Good management really comes down to applying the golden rule. After all, we're all human. Your computers and machines can run all day and all night without so much as a pat to keeping the working the way they're supposed to, but your humans are your strongest asset. And they'll work better with an occasional pat on the back and word of thanks.