

Management Nonsense

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One example of “management nonsense” is the statement by managers that “I will only tell you when you are doing something wrong. If you do not hear from me, you are doing fine.” Such a statement is typical of managers who rely predominantly upon negative reinforcement as a behavior-shaping tool. This management ideology, that negative reinforcement should be the primary method of feedback to be used, has potentially serious negative consequences on both employees and the organization as a whole. Over-usage of negative reinforcement can be detrimental to employee morale and can muddle clear communication of administrative expectations.

Firstly, managers should recognize that employees may have needs beyond financial compensation. According to Newport (1972), humans have physiological, psychological, and sociological needs. Psychological needs include “the need for achievement, status, self-respect, and self-expression” while sociological needs encompass “the need to belong, the need for love and affection, the need for acceptance, and the need for security.” (Newport, 1972) Such psychological needs must be met through interactions and employees must feel motivated and accepted to be fully productive. Many employees are motivated by social factors of their working environment, and lack of praise by administration of special efforts or performance results tend to leave many employees unfulfilled. Managers should see the larger picture and variety of uses of reinforcement: while negative reinforcement is an important tool for managers to use to discourage certain activities that are detrimental to the organization, sole reliance on this form of feedback can lead to serious side effects. McLean (1982) recalls multiple instances when managers found opportunities to positively reinforce desired behaviors instead of only focusing on mistakes, as exemplified in the passage, “As she read each report, she looked for

opportunities to provide reinforcement... The president also took advantage of the opportunity to coach... individuals started to give serious thought to what they wanted to be able to report at the end of the New Year as their most significant contributions...” This passage reiterates the importance of positive reinforcement as a binding force and motivator, providing basic tenants of organizational acceptance and security: important employee needs that Newport emphasized. These complex and interrelated needs cannot be met solely through negative reinforcement techniques, and when such fundamental needs are not met, morale may be adversely affected.

Overuse of negative reinforcement can also muddle organizational communication and expectations. At the most basic level, failure of management to encourage activities that promote the organization’s mission may leave employees with a feeling of confusion and ambiguity. If most feedback a high-performance employee receives is negative, they may be discouraged from expending above-average effort again without sufficient supporting praise to encourage similar results in the future. They may also feel their contributions are being minimized by administration or may become resentful of management, believing that management is an entity working against them, therefore becoming despondent. Such feelings of only a few individuals could eventually work to erode the solidarity of the entire organization. Simon (1957) supports the claim of the importance of positive stimuli in organizations in his passage, “...decision is initiated by stimuli which channel attention in definite directions, and that the response to the stimuli is partly reasoned, but in large part habitual.” Without clear positive stimuli to guide an employee’s direction, simple work habit, and not a drive for a fresh, creative approach, may be the end result. Employees may adapt their behavior so that they expend only minimal habitual effort, learning to simply avoid negative encounters while forgoing opportunities to make significant contributions to the organization that involve a degree

of risk to the psychological or sociological satisfaction they require of their job. Employees that do not receive praise for work that contributes strongly to the organizational mission realistically have little or no incentive to continue above-average efforts.

While negative reinforcement is a useful tool, it must be used in moderation and as part of an integral approach to administrative feedback. This notion is supported by Plunkett and Hale (1982), “The practice of responding negatively to undesirable behavior is unfortunately the most common form of reinforcement... less skilled manager[s] might see and respond only to an employee’s tardiness [while a skilled supervisor recognized an opportunity to use the technique in a positive way by acknowledging the extra effort put forth to overcome an obstacle to getting to work.]” Plunkett and Hale detail the use of positive reinforcement as an advanced management strategy, as a tool preferable to chastising or demeaning contributions. Furthermore, all the authors cited in this paper seem to understand that negative reinforcement is an important behavior shaping technique, but one that can have lasting, serious consequences on both employees and organizations if used improperly or disproportionately.

Bibliography

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