

/IN PRACTICE/

Positive Reinforcement: Misunderstood and Misused

By Aubrey C. Daniels
and James E. Daniels

“BROWNIE, you’re doing a heck of a job.”

Pundits dubbed it the quote of 2005, but President Bush’s phrase turned the spotlight on one of the most misunderstood tools of leadership—positive reinforcement. It also had the effect of reinforcing a whole set of inappropriate behaviors, even though his intention was to show support for former FEMA Director Michael Brown and his department for their response to hurricane Katrina.

Business books have consistently trivialized the concept, making it difficult for executives to take “warm fuzzies” and “atta-boys” seriously when they are responsible for making crucial decisions about the bottom line. But leaders need to truly understand positive reinforcement because it is the only behavioral consequence that can maximize all aspects of the corporation’s performance.

Unfortunately, most leaders understand positive reinforcement as a common-sense tool rather than a scientific one. While leaders do not have to personally deliver positive reinforcement, they do need to develop their organization’s systems, policies, and processes (as well as the skills of their managers) to facilitate its efficient and effective delivery.

A large part of the leader’s role in creating the best working environment is to make sure that positive reinforcement is understood and delivered for the right behaviors, at the right time, and at the right frequency. That means that all policies and procedures should be inspected from this perspective: You get more of what you reinforce. Emphasize the wrong behavior and you get more of it. It is a folly to reinforce one behavior and expect another, but it happens in organizations every day. For example, Jeff Skilling, of Enron fame, was known

to praise deals that made money even though they had been carried out against his orders. You don’t need to know much about the science of human behavior to know the result of that misguided praise.

Here are five considerations or rules for the efficient and effective delivery of positive reinforcement:

Make it personal. To be effective, the reinforcement must mean something to the person receiving it. Some people hate to be recognized for anything in public. Your job is to find out what is significant to the individual.

Make it immediate. The longer you wait to reinforce desired behavior, the less effective it is. Catch and positively reinforce people in the act of doing what you want and you’ll always get better results.

Make it frequent. We have been asked many times, “Can you reinforce too much?” The answer depends on how the praise is delivered. If you do it wrong, one time is too much. If you do it correctly, don’t worry about it doing it too much. After all, does a golfer ever get tired of being told “good shot?” People almost never complain about too much reinforcement: They frequently complain of too little.

Make it earned. Indiscriminate praise is a bad practice for the person receiving the praise and for the person giving it. People respect leaders who deliver reinforcement contingent on some accomplishment. Leaders who reinforce the good, the bad, and the ugly equally are perceived as weak and do not have the respect of their staff.

Make it social. Money is an effective reinforcer when you follow the rules above. The problem with using money, however, is that it cannot be given frequently in most organizations.

Money is most effective when used as a backup to social reinforcers—any in-

teraction, without the use of gifts, that lets the performer know that she is valued or appreciated. Examples include getting a colleague to tell you how he was able to accomplish a difficult task, asking a team’s permission to share their ideas and work practices with others, visiting an employee in her workspace, rather than in your office, and having a conversation about how things are going in her life. Of course, smiles, waves, and other non-verbal ways of communicating your pleasure can never be over-done and are almost always appreciated and motivational.

When given correctly, positive reinforcement can produce amazing results. If you want to become a more effective leader, you must think of positive reinforcement as a scientific concept and develop the skills necessary to deliver it effectively.

Aubrey C. Daniels and **James E. Daniels** are the authors of *Measure of a Leader*. They are the founder and chairman and vice president, respectively, of Aubrey Daniels International; www.aubreydaniels.com.