

# The Platinum Rule

An overview of the behavioral approach to management for the newcomer or for the manager who has forgotten its benefits.

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Everyone should be familiar with the Golden Rule: "Do unto others what you would have done unto you." If you take it one step further, you might have a Platinum Rule: "Motivation is the result of recognizing and rewarding performance improvements in a meaningful and timely way." But, like the Golden Rule, the Platinum Rule is not easily followed. Successful application of the Platinum Rule requires several key components, the first of which has to do with the objective measurement and recognition of performance. The other components involve finding ways to provide positive consequences for improvement—including feedback and praise, credit for doing a good job, and other rewards—and then formally reevaluating the resulting effects on performance.

Increasing employee productivity and efficiency is the most challenging task of today's manager because workers are more mobile and specialized than at any point in history. The art of managing others is a process that is constantly changing and evolving. As a result, many of the managerial precepts proposed only a few years ago are outdated. Although strong support remains for theories put forth by McGregor, Maslow, and Herzberg, the behavioral approach to managing employees—while no longer new—has made huge inroads, a direct result of its successful applications.

Behavioral approaches are based on the premise that employees are more produc-

tive when the manager provides frequent, meaningful, and positive consequences for their performance. The approach places little emphasis on internal states of motivation, emphasizing instead the role the environment plays in motivation and performance.

In contrast to more esoteric theories, the behavioral approach to managing employees offers a hands-on, practical, and documented framework for viewing and handling employee performance problems. Today's manager is becoming a more precise, technical, and scientific supervisor.

The behavioral approach can be taught to virtually all levels of management, irrespective of educational level. It does not require an in-depth understanding of complicated internal states or psychological considerations many other theories rely on.

Surprisingly, given their educational backgrounds, not all managers have been exposed to the behavioral approach, a deficiency that leaves them inadequately equipped to deal with people problems in an objective and systematic manner. That most of them are promoted into supervisory capacities primarily because they have a history of performing the technical aspects of their jobs well exacerbates the problem. Understanding the Platinum Rule can ease it. To apply it, use the following six-step procedure.

## Defining the performance

Ask yourself the following questions:

- Is the behavior observable?
- Can the behavior be counted? That is, how or at what level does it occur often (hourly, daily, weekly, or monthly)?

■ Could an outsider also count how often or at what level the behavior occurs and come up with the same answer?

Precisely defining employee performance in behavioral terms can be difficult. In most work environments, there are few, if any, existing standards to help the manager make objective decisions regarding acceptable levels of employee performance. For example, a manager rated an employee low on "attitude" during a performance appraisal session. The employee contested the rating, filed a grievance, and subsequently won the grievance because there was not a "meeting of the minds" on what was meant by "attitude."

In using a behavioral approach, "attitude" might have been defined as the number of times the employee refused to meet the assigned goal or the number of times the employee rejected suggestions for improvements from the supervisor. We do not advocate that a manager keep track of a lot of small details unrelated to the performance. Rather, we recommend that desired employee performance be broken down into its meaningful components, which then can be used as the basis for performance evaluation.

## Observing and recording the performance

When the manager clearly understands what employee performance is to be changed, the next steps are to accurately observe and record performance. Remember, the recording system must be kept as simple as possible. Such monitoring and control might be accomplished using a tally sheet or a computer printout containing multiple performance indicators. Simple measurements might also

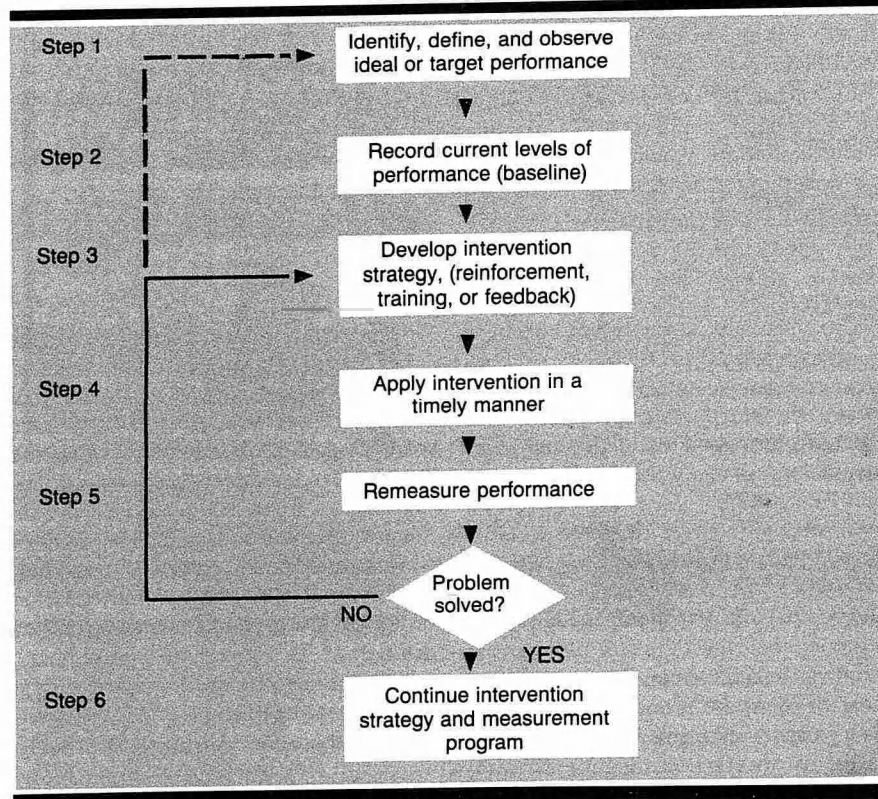
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**Figure 1—Possible on-the-job reinforcers**

<p><i>Social</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Verbal praise</li> <li>Special job title</li> <li>Recognition in front of coworkers</li> <li>Notes of thanks</li> <li>Picture in company paper</li> <li>Pats on the back</li> <li>Greetings from boss</li> </ul>	<p><i>Special Privileges</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Own parking space</li> <li>No-punch lunch</li> <li>Birthday off</li> <li>Longer coffee breaks</li> <li>Flexible work schedule</li> <li>Training for better job</li> <li>Earned time off</li> </ul>
<p><i>Material</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Awards/plaques</li> <li>Fringe benefits</li> <li>Special badges or insignias</li> <li>Raises/bonuses</li> <li>Large office</li> <li>Performance appraisal ratings</li> <li>Free tickets to sporting events</li> </ul>	<p><i>Tokens</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Telephone credit cards</li> <li>Points backed by prizes</li> <li>Coupons redeemable at local stores</li> <li>Chances to win a prize (lottery)</li> </ul>

**Figure 2—The Platinum Rule model**



be taken from existing recording forms such as attendance sheets.

Often, the process of recording the frequency of a performance sheds light on performance problems. For example, one employee in five might have an attendance problem. This truant employee reports to work 75 percent of the time, while the other four employees average over 95 percent attendance. Hence, overall attendance would be 91 percent (an unaccept-

table level). Observing and measuring the performance can help identify the source, or sources, of the problem.

### Develop a positive intervention strategy

Once the current level of performance is determined, observed, and recorded, you are ready to intervene and tackle the performance problem. Again, simplicity is

your watchword. The intervention can be as simple as verbal feedback or as complex as a token system where an employee can earn points exchangeable for tangible gifts. One manager designed an intervention program that awarded points for the number of daily inspections completed, points for perfect attendance, and points for accuracy of written reports submitted.

The intervention that first comes to mind is offering employees money or other bonuses. Although private organizations are more inclined to use this incentive, such funds are scarce in the public sector. However, research repeatedly has shown that the incentives most valued by employees are not related to monetary compensation but, rather, to respect and praise for doing a job well. (See Figure 1 for possible interventions.)

The intervention must fit the degree of employee effort necessary to generate the performance. For example, it would be inappropriate to give an employee Friday afternoon off just for arriving at work on time the previous week. A better intervention would be to post on the company bulletin board the names of employees with perfect attendance for that week.

### Remeasure and evaluate the performance

The only way to determine if your intervention is successful is by monitoring and measuring performance. In so doing, be certain to measure the performance for a sufficient time, since some behaviors do not respond immediately to interventions. If performance improves, congratulations! If it doesn't, simply recycle back through the steps of the Platinum Rule model using a modified or new intervention. (See Figure 2.)

The rewards of the behavioral approach are manifold. For one, overall communication with your employees is likely to improve as you begin to identify for them the performance you expect. They will soon see that good things happen to them when they exhibit an acceptable level of performance.