

Effort Management

Why reinforcing results may not be enough.

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YOU HEAR THE SAME MANTRA, regardless of your field: Everyone is screaming for results. And behaviorists will tell you that results are what count. If you just positively reinforce the results you want and avoid reinforcing the results you don't want, then future behaviors will lead to similar beneficial results. But that isn't always true.

Learning and performance professionals, as well as human resources professionals, know the importance of praise and positive reinforcement to achieve positive outcomes. In fact, most people will tell you that praise is good for both the person giving it and receiving it. After all, when someone tells you how good you are or how well you performed, that person feels good for giving you praise and you feel better after receiving it, right?

Well, not always. This common wisdom is actually a critical myth. All positive reinforcement does not always lead to more positive results or improved job performance. Yet, because we've all done it, we expect positive reinforcement to motivate the person to do the job or task again, and to hopefully do it even better the next time.

Reinforce the effort

Here is the problem: We are leaving out reinforcement for the effort. Research in attribution theory (the reasons we give for the outcomes of our performances) and motivation theory tells us conclusively that when we only reward ability, we run the risk of scaring off the person for the next time. Now, this does not happen all the time, but it does happen. Some people are so locked into a fixed mindset or belief that their self-worth is tied to innate abilities such as being smart, good looking, musically inclined, or athletic. When you praise their ability, you might actually frighten them because now they

have to succeed the next time. Expectations rise, pressure mounts, and a fear of success creeps in.

On the other hand, when you praise both the effort and the achievement, you will find that people are more willing to do a task again, take on different or more challenging tasks, or set their own expectations at a higher level for future performances. People who are told how great they are when they successfully complete an easy task tend to doubt their ability to do as well on a harder task. They want to protect their self image and self esteem, so they often choose not to perform the next time around just in case they don't do well. People who are told specifically about the effort they put in, how they made progress on the way to perfect performance, and how they can continue to learn from what they accomplished, however, are usually more motivated to try again, perform at a higher level, and even request more difficult tasks.

Here is an example of what we mean. Think about a child learning to walk. We do not praise the child only after she walks because, at first, an infant falls more than she stands. Instead, we praise the effort of the child as she rises, stumbles a few steps, falls down, and repeats the process. With each extra step, we are praising both the effort and the improving result. We also are speeding up the skill acquisition process, and that's why children usually walk before they are physiologically ready. We would never think of telling the infant how poorly she is walking or how incompetent she is in learning to perform this task. So, why is this done in the workplace?

Reinforce the results

We call the concept of how to effectively reinforce the attempt to learn "effort management." It requires that everyone manage the effort they put into achieving a goal or objective.

Effort varies. Sometimes people put in the proper amount of effort to achieve a goal and sometimes they do not. If they can attribute an outcome to effort, or lack of effort, they can easily determine what they must do to perform better next time. (The level of difficulty doesn't matter.) However, if they attribute what they accomplish to their innate abilities, and this attribution is for an easy achievement, they will be hard-pressed to try something more difficult next time. That's because they believe they will be evaluated by observers and they don't want to ruin their image in case they fail. The same is true for someone who thinks they have the ability to achieve at a certain level but undertakes a task that is too difficult. In both situations, they have locked themselves into a fixed mindset about how to do the task, and their entire being becomes wrapped up in the outcome. People who manage their effort, on the other hand, see every performance and every result as a learning opportunity.

Build up a person's confidence and self-esteem through reinforcement of the results they achieve related to both their abilities and effort. Everyone who is in a relationship with the performer (boss, parent, teacher, or friend) must provide positive reinforcement of both effort and ability as it relates to outcomes to help that person stay motivated to continue learning and performing at a high level.

However, this does not mean that you should never reinforce the outcome of a job performance exclusively. When someone is expected to perform at a certain level, and they do so, you should provide them with positive reinforcement related to that outcome.

But, you also should combine that with reinforcement for the effort they put in while achieving the objective. When you provide feedback this way, good effort managers use it to improve next time. To them, both success and failure are merely fuel to focus more on the task

the next time. In the case of failure, they learn from the experience and any feedback. And because their self-confidence remains high, they are motivated to perform the task again and improve. Even better, they may take on a harder task and still expect to perform at a high level.

As trainers, consultants, managers, leaders, human resource professionals, and business owners, you must remember to focus on the effort people put in when they achieve a goal. Talk to them about the specifics of what they were doing. Don't tell them how smart they were or how much talent they have, unless you have first showed them how their effort also contributed to their outcome. Specify the behaviors they displayed to achieve their goals, reinforce the importance of future effort, and then help them understand how effort will always increase ability, but ability will not always increase effort. When you employ effort management, you employ top performers.

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