

HOW TO MANAGE PEOPLE POSITIVELY: A KEY TO POSITIVE MOTIVATION

William Doverspike, Ph.D.

Drdoverspike.com

770-913-0506

Managing people has as much to do with basic motivational principles as it does with understanding the technical requirements of a job. Many managers understand their jobs, but they do not understand their employees. Understanding people requires understanding the behavioral principles that motivate behavior. Rather than using ineffective methods that produce negative outcomes, organizational psychologists use management strategies that are based on positive motivational principles. There are several operant behavioral principles that have been proven to be effective in motivating behavior.

Ask for and reward small achievements of new behavior. Rather than requesting too much at first, divide the overall task into manageable components. For example, if an employee's office is a mess, start first by asking that only the desk be cleaned up.

Ask for active, not passive, behavior. Ask for positive rather than negative actions. In other words, request the presence of a specific desired behavior rather than the absence of an undesired behavior. Say "Do this" rather than "Don't do that" when you describe what you want done.

Ask for work before play. Apply the Premack principle and don't reverse the order. Behavioral psychologists have demonstrated that high frequency behaviors (e.g., play) can be used as natural reinforcers of low frequency behaviors (e.g., work) if the high frequency behaviors are made contingent on the low frequency behaviors. In other words, do your least rewarding work first and the most rewarding work last. In other words, work first and then play.

Use immediate rewards. As soon as possible after your employee accomplishes the task, praise the person for it. Don't delay praise, but deliver it immediately. Professional animal trainers reward target behaviors within a second or two of their occurrence. Effective managers should praise immediately and without delay.

Reward often at first and then less often in the future. At first, reinforce nearly every action that is in the desired direction, no matter how small it is. This will keep the new behavior going as you reward progressively less often in the future. As the behavior becomes more established, reward less frequently. Psychologists refer to this principle as "stretching" the reinforcement interval, which results in the behavior eventually being more permanent performance and more resistant to extinction.

Reward specifically. Don't reward general obedience or good intentions, but instead reinforce effort and productivity. Specify your goals operationally. Ask for—and reward—specific tasks completed. For example, if your employee is fairly productive all day, don't reward him by saying "You were great today." Do say, "You were great in completing 12 reports today."

Reward high-quality performance. Keep your standards realistically high and achievable for the task you want your employee to accomplish. Let the person know exactly what you want done. For example, if your employee does manage to meet a deadline on which you've both agreed but he or she has made a number of errors, call the errors to his attention and let him redo the work. However, following the primary principal of using immediate reward, do reward the person partially for that portion of the performance that is acceptable.

Keep your agreement with your employee clear and simple. For example, it is better to say “Please hand in a legible report” rather than “Don’t hand in sloppy work.” Describe specifically what behavior you expect. For example, say to your coworker, “If you move the chairs, I’ll clear the tables” rather than saying, “If you help me organize, I’ll help you around the office.”

Be consistent in your interactions. Once you and your employee agree on a plan, stick to it. Don’t stop your plan unless there is a very special reason to do so. For example, if you and your employee agree that he’ll print out 12 reports before leaving for the day, don’t stop him after 10 reports because you’re feeling guilty about his working so hard that day.

Always be fair and honest. Never use gimmicks or manipulation. Your employee should feel that the reward you offer is worth his efforts. Never withhold a reward if it is justly deserved.

Transfer the initiative as soon as you can. As soon as it is practical, shift the responsibility for the new behavior over to your employee. Ultimately, what you’re after is your employee’s own self-management. When this is done, it will be easier for you and it will help your employee grow in both career and self-confidence.

Forget about punishment. Behavioral psychologists have demonstrated that punishment can decrease target behaviors if the punishment is immediate, severe, and consistent. However, punishment can inhibit and reduce behavior in general, and punishment is never an effective means of establishing behavior. Rather than punishing what is wrong, catch the person doing right and then reinforce the behavior.

Use these principles to motivate yourself. Last but not least, use these motivation principles to manage your own work. Divide large tasks into their smaller components. Focus on active rather than passive behavior by using a “to do” list rather than a “don’t do” list. To increase productivity with work, then work before play. To increase play, then play before work. Use rewards for specific performance. Be honest with yourself.

Copyright © 2008 by William F. Doverspike, Ph.D.
Content last updated 2021

The correct citation for this article is Doverspike, W. F. (2008, February). How to manage people positively: A key to positive motivation. <http://drwilliamdoverspike.com/>

The original title was “Managing people using positive motivation: A key to positive motivation.”