

Positive Reinforcement, Reward, and Recognition: *Critical Distinctions and a Reality Check*

Listen to a behavior-based safety (BBS) trainer or consultant and you will likely hear the term “positive reinforcement.” Many BBS trainers claim positive reinforcement is the most effective procedure for improving safety-related behavior. Here, I offer critical distinctions between positive reinforcement, reward, and recognition; and explain the standard BBS instruction for giving recognition can be undesirable.

Misuse of Technical Language

Trainers and users of BBS throw around the term “positive reinforcement” too freely. My partners at Safety Performance Solutions (SPS) and I use the term “reward” instead. Here’s why. First, reinforcement is not a stimulus nor an event. It is a procedure using consequences to increase behavior. The consequence is a positive reinforcer if the target behavior is emitted to obtain it. When behavior occurs to escape or avoid a consequence, that stimulus event is a negative reinforcer.

If the target behavior does not increase in frequency, intensity, or duration, the procedure was not reinforcement and the consequence was not a reinforcer. Furthermore, only behaviors are reinforced, not people. Thus, it is incorrect to say, “I want to reinforce you for actively caring.”

In the workplace, it’s usually impossible to observe whether a consequence is a reinforcer. In fact, positive consequences are typically delivered when a person goes beyond the call of duty -- meaning the target behavior is already at a high level of frequency, intensity, or duration. Therefore, these consequences only serve to support or maintain behavior, not reinforce it.

It's Better to Reward

You can avoid confusing the technical versus dictionary meaning of “reinforce” and “reinforcement” by using the term “reward.” This term can be used as a procedure or a consequence. We reward people with rewards. The reward can be one-on-one recognition, a group celebration dinner, supportive feedback, credits toward the purchase of a catalogue gift item, a financial bonus, or a small trinket.

Rewards are directed at people, with the intention of improving or maintaining their desirable behavior. However, some rewards are given long after the occurrence of the target behavior. Some are not even associated with behavior, but rather reflect a series of achievements from an individual, team, or entire organization. Therefore, in many situations rewards do not directly influence behavior.

If a pleasant consequence does not increase the behavior it follows it is not a positive reinforcer and is worthless from a strict behavioral perspective. Not so for rewards. Rewards can be significant when the reward does not directly influence behavior. Rewards can make a person feel better, and this is a worthwhile outcome by itself. Plus, when rewards increase such internal person states as self-esteem, personal control, or optimism, they have beneficial indirect impact on desirable behaviors.

As I explained in my *ISHN* contribution in January 1993, the person states referred to above increase a person's willingness to look out for the safety of others. Thus, whether or not a reward increases the behavior it follows, it is apt to improve one or more feeling states that make people more likely to actively care for other people's welfare. So, I suggest we look for opportunities to reward people for quality performance, and deliver the reward well.

It's in the Delivery

The delivery of a reward can be more influential than the material consequence. Rewards are not payoffs for performance, but rather a means of recognizing people for their special efforts.

Rewards that can be displayed, like placards, trophies, and framed certificates, are especially beneficial because they remind recipients of their extraordinary performance each time they look at it. And, they can show these rewards to others, thereby facilitating conversation about personal accomplishment. This can increase recipient commitment and self-direction to live up to the meaning behind the reward.

In my *ISHN* contribution for February 2005, I noted the value of linking a special, even emotional, meaning to safety-related rewards. I suggested substituting the term “safety memento” for the word “safety trinket.” But calling a reward a “memento” means an important or emotional significance is associated with the reward. How can this happen? You got it – it's in the delivery.

Is Interpersonal Recognition Rewarding?

More than 20 years ago, the best-selling *One-Minute Manager* by Ken Blanchard and Spencer Johnson urged us to give the people we manage one-minute praise everyday, along with one-minute goal-setting and one-minute reprimands. Today, we say goals need to be SMART (for Specific, Motivation, Achievable, Relevant, and Trackable). We also claim praise or interpersonal recognition should occur far more often than reprimands, by at least a 4 to 1 margin. Plus, we substitute “corrective action” for “reprimand”, and incorporate empathetic listening and interpersonal coaching.

The strategy for giving interpersonal recognition has not changed much over the years, except some claim recognition should be public, as in the popular slogan

“reprimand privately, recognize publicly;” while others claim recognition should be delivered privately and one-on-one. An article in the January 2006 issue of *Professional Safety* introduced a scoring system to rate the value of verbal praise on a four-point scale, with Level 4 (for “mastered recognition”) being positive, specific, timely, sincere, and *public*.

My *ISHN* article in December 1996 presented seven guidelines for giving quality recognition. The sequential steps offered are consistent with those in the article referred to above, except I recommended private over public recognition. Why? Because some people feel embarrassed when group attention is directed toward them. Sometimes those recognized fear negative consequences from peers, perhaps because of envy or because it’s not “cool” to be praised for safety. In other words, for some people public praise is not rewarding.

Public recognition can also be de-motivating to members of the audience who believe they also deserve the reward. Public recognition of five individuals at the staff Christmas party of a large construction firm illustrates my point. For the first time in its 25-year history, the owner and CEO handed recognition plaques to five employees for “going beyond the call of duty.” However, these five individuals were relatively new hires, and many in the audience of 300 looked at each other in utter dismay. “Why should those five short-term employees get this rare recognition over many others who have done so much for our company over a much longer term?”

The Delivery of One-On-One Recognition

For over two decades, I have taught supervisors and line workers specific sequential steps for giving recognition. Training sessions included role-play exercises in

which participants developed and demonstrated skits to illustrate proper recognition techniques; and I offered supportive and corrective feedback.

In his 2005 book, *Praise for Profit*, Jerry Pounds describes how he and colleagues at a large behavior-focused consulting firm taught the same basic recognition steps for over 30 years. Briefly, we both taught participants to specify the target behavior, deliver it soon after you observe the behavior, be genuine and personal, use “I” statements, resist bringing up other matters, and relate the behavior to a higher-order quality like leadership, integrity, or trust-worthiness.

This sounds good, right? Well, Jerry Pounds offers a reality check on these recognition steps. He says thousands of supervisors who attended his classes on behavior-based recognition “rebelled vehemently” to following the recognition steps. Many complained “they would feel stupid and out of character going around saying nice things to employees after years of ignoring them” (p.52).

As a result of this apparent “manipulation,” Pounds reports “what we were asking the supervisors to do was humiliating for them and the employees,” and as a result they “adopted an attitude of mischievous sarcasm” with comments like “I hate to do this but I’m going to have to reinforce you for that”. Later, many employees used the recognition process as an excuse to escape accountability. “If their performance did not reach expectations, they said it was because they had not been appropriately praised for their efforts” (p. 59).

Just Show Interest in People

Dale Carnegie had it right. The best and simplest way to recognize people is to show genuine interest in what they are doing. Similarly, Dr. Blanchard has recently simplified the responsibility of the “one-minute manager” to convincing people they are

doing worthwhile work. So we return to my prior point about meaningfulness and delivery.

A simple “thank you” can be a powerful support of desirable behavior and a booster of self-esteem and optimism. But, this statement of gratitude must be sincere and genuine. Plus, the recipient knows what action(s) warrant the praise and believes this action reflects worthwhile work.

Bottom line: Set aside that sequence of behavioral steps you were taught for giving interpersonal recognition, and merely show bona fide interest and appreciation in what people do to keep themselves and others safe. You might not increase the frequency of behavior already high in the person’s work priorities. But, you will likely enhance positive feelings about the job, thereby leading to a valuable boost in self-worth, competence, and a sense of belongingness.

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Dr. Geller and his partners at Safety Performance Solutions (SPS) help companies worldwide approach industrial safety with a proactive, actively-caring stance. Coastal Training and Technologies Corporation has recently published Dr. Geller’s new book on people-based safety, as well as five video/CD/DVD programs, accompanied by workbooks and leader guides. For more information, please log on to www.people-based-safety.com or call SPS at 540-951-7233.