

## **Rewards and Positive Reinforcers are Not the Same: But We Need Both**

Aubrey Daniels, author of *Bringing out the best in people: The astonishing power of positive reinforcement*, emphasizes the special distinction between positive reinforcement and other pleasant consequences like rewards, positive feedback, group celebrations, and interpersonal recognition. In a panel discussion at the second annual "Behavioral Safety Now" users conference in Houston last November, for example, he warned a large audience to realize the special status of "positive reinforcement" and to act accordingly. The implication was that reinforcers are much more important than rewards, feedback celebrations, and recognition.

From conversations with participants at the Houston conference, I learned that many did not understand the difference between positive reinforcers and other positive consequences. And more importantly, several individuals wondered whether Dr. Daniels was advising people to stop using rewards, recognition, and group celebrations to motivate safe work practices. This is a logical conclusion, especially if you've heard about (or read) Alfie Kohn's 1995 book, *Punished by rewards: The trouble with gold stars, incentive plans, A's, praise, and other bribe's*. This conclusion would be very wrong, and detrimental to safety and health improvement.

Not only do safety professionals need to understand why this conclusion is wrong, they need to convince others of the astonishing power of rewards, celebrations, and recognition, as well as positive reinforcement.

### **Reinforcers vs. Rewards**

Technically, a behavioral consequence is only a positive reinforcer if the behavior it follows increases in frequency, intensity, or duration of occurrence. You could give a

person recognition, feedback, or even a financial bonus and not influence the behavior you are intending to reward. The special recognition for following all safety procedures, for example, can't improve the targeted behaviors since they're already at 100%. And, the financial bonus a person receives for demonstrating better safety performance last month does not necessarily influence any behavior. Even if the behaviors accomplished for the improved safety performance were designated, you can't be sure the financial bonus was a positive reinforcer unless you observe an improvement in the targeted behaviors after delivery of the positive consequence.

Because it's usually impossible to know whether a positive consequence has the intended beneficial impact on behavior in real-world situations, I rarely use the term "positive reinforcer." Instead, I use the more common term "reward." A reward is a positive consequence given to an individual or a group with the intention of improving or maintaining desired behavior. The reward can be one-on-one recognition, a group celebration dinner, a positive feedback presentation, credits toward the purchase of a catalogue gift item, a financial bonus, or a small trinket containing a safety logo.

A reward might be given long after occurrences of the desired behavior, and therefore it's unlikely it will have a direct effect on that behavior. In fact, some rewards, like steak dinners to celebrate the attainment of safety performance milestones, are not even associated with specific behaviors. The behavior most often reinforced by group recognition ceremonies is attendance at the session. And, the behavior most likely reinforced by awarding companies with a safety improvement placard is the behavior of someone walking to the stage to receive the prize and public recognition.

So when Dr. Daniels warned the Houston audience not to presume their recognition, feedback, and celebration programs were "positive reinforcers," this is what he meant. Just because you are giving a person a positive consequence, you are not necessarily influencing the behavior you'd like to improve. One could interpret this warning as a recommendation to decrease the use of recognition, feedback, and celebration processes. This might especially be the case if you take Alfie Kohn's erroneous conclusions seriously. I urge you not to do so. Even if a reward does not improve behavior directly, it has other special benefits.

### **What Rewards Do For Us**

The strict behavioral approach to safety does not recognize much if any value in rewards. If the positive consequence does not improve the behavior it follows, then it has no value, at least from a behavior-based perspective. In other words, if a behavior analyst observes no change in a target behavior when a particular stimulus event follows it, then that stimulus is considered neutral or inconsequential. It would be considered useless in that situation, and no longer applied.

From a person-based perspective, however, a positive consequence or reward has value beyond behavior change. If given genuinely, interpersonal recognition, group celebration, and positive feedback improves internal unobservable aspects of people. In a word, they make you feel better. And whether or not a target behavior improves, the reward was valuable. With a person-based approach, increasing people's feeling states is a worthwhile outcome by itself, regardless of any behavioral effects. It's likely, however, that improving internal person states will have beneficial indirect impact on safety-related behavior.

So what feeling states are likely to be influenced by a genuine rewarding experience? In what ways do you feel better after being rewarded for exemplary performance? Do you get a boost in self-esteem, meaning you feel better about yourself? Do you feel more competent at the task or activity singled out for the reward? Do you sense a greater degree of personal control over the targeted activity, or are you more optimistic that you'll be successful in the future? Do you feel greater belongingness or connectedness with others when you attend a celebration dinner with your work team?

Answering "yes" to any of these questions testifies to the value of rewards. Not only because they make you feel good, but because they improve certain person states which in turn increase the occurrence of desirable behavior. More specifically, each question above relates to one of five person states, respectively self-esteem, self-efficacy, personal control, optimism, and belongingness. And according to substantial psychological research, when any of these internal feeling states is increased, a person's willingness to look out for the welfare of others is also increased. Therefore, whether or not a reward increases the behavior it follows, it is apt to improve one or more person state which in turn makes actively caring more likely.

### **In Conclusion**

A positive reinforcer is not the same as a reward, but we need more of both to improve safety performance. A consequence is a positive reinforcer if the behavior it follows increases in quality or quantity. Many positive consequences we give people are not reinforcers because they do not have a direct effect on behavior. And in real-world situations, we usually don't know whether our positive consequences have direct

behavioral impact. As such, I recommend the label "reward" for most of the positive consequences we give others for their commendable performance, whether the consequence is feedback, recognition, or a prize in an incentive program.

A person-based perspective provides justification for our rewards even when behavior is not directly influenced. When delivered appropriately, rewards always bring out the best in people because they improve those feeling states which increase propensity to actively care. Depending on the circumstances, a reward benefits a person's self-esteem, self-efficacy, personal control, optimism, or belongingness. And improving any of these person states makes it more likely an individual will help another person. This is truly bringing out the best in people, and we can all do this. Just look for more opportunities to reward quality performance, and deliver the reward well.

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NOTE: Dr. Geller and his colleagues at Safety Performance Solutions offer workshops, books, videotapes, and audiotapes on strategies for bringing out the best in people and benefiting industrial safety and health. For more information please call SPS, Inc. at (540) 951-7233 (SAFE).