

Positive Reinforcement: The Best Safety Tool

Motivation, through positive reinforcement, is subject matter about which much has been written and discussed by educators, behaviorists and business people. In reality, we often talk about it, but rarely see it applied in day-to-day business practice. In accident prevention programs, emphasis continues on reactive, negative disciplinary measures after accidents occur. Although discipline may be necessary to correct past unacceptable performance, its use should be limited to just that. To affect positive change and create employee preference for safe conditions and behavior, management emphasis must shift toward proactive, positive attention to safe work behavior, safe working conditions and the "job well done".

People are motivated to achieve desired management results as a direct consequence of positive experiences in their work. It is up to management to create positive feelings through the act of recognizing what is desirable. Following is a five-step program for excellence for safety, quality, productivity and service.

DEFINE THE GOAL

Use simple and measurable terms: "Our goal is to reduce accident frequency by 40% in 2010. To achieve this result, our total accidents this year must not exceed 10." The objective must be reasonable and attainable.

SET STANDARDS

On paper, establish a list of basic steps necessary for each operating entity (manager, supervisor, employee) to achieve the stated result. (See Attachment for sample standards which apply to this accident frequency reduction model.)

PROVIDE TRAINING

Management must define, through instruction, "desired behavior". Training should be concise and

complete. It should conclude with the trainee demonstrating his/her understanding of the correct behavior.

SELECT REINFORCEMENT METHODS

In determining the employee's reward for demonstrating the desired behavior, it is important for management to decide what will provide the necessary incentive. The reward does not necessarily need to be material, and should never be construed as a bribe. Effective rewards can range from a sincerely delivered compliment to some small token which may later be exchanged for a prize. Whatever the selected method, a key element in its effectiveness will be the manner in which the actual recognition is delivered to the employee.

For example, Bob, a professional manager, is called to a regular staff meeting. During the meeting, the President announces a 45% accident frequency reduction in Bob's department and asks Bob's peers to join him in a round of applause for innovating a shop housekeeping contest. Clearly, the wise President has achieved the desired effect. Bob has gained a positive experience, one which should be shared with Bob's employees. Bob is likely to repeat the behavior which caused it, and Bob's peers have learned how they can earn similar praise!

IMPLEMENT THE REINFORCEMENT OF DESIRED BEHAVIOR

This is where the hard work begins for the manager who will succeed with this program; indeed, it is at this point where failure most often occurs. The manager must begin to seek desired behavior and not fall victim to the idea that recognition for partial achievement will be a positive motivator. Recognition for partially correct behavior will only convince the employee it's okay for him/her to sell management short on its own standards.

Noted management consultant and professor, Peter F. Drucker, said "People are proud if they have something to be proud of -- otherwise, it is false pride and destructive. People have a sense of accomplishment only if they have accomplished something." At the outset of a positive recognition program, the careful seeker will find desired behavior with patience and persistence. Once discovered, the behavior must be specified in the delivery of the reward/recognition. "You did a good job today, Bill", is not a statement sufficient to communicate what the employee did to earn the recognition.

The most important thing to remember about positive reinforcement effort is that it must be ongoing and consistent. Sporadic recognition will not result in repetition of desired behavior. Instead, the employee is likely to doubt the sincerity and intent of the program. This, in turn, will cause negative results.

Someone once said, "The biggest thrill in life is a job well done." Do those in your organization know when their jobs are well done? Take a look at the personnel folders of those you consider your stable and loyal "doers". Do you find printed evidence of your recognition of their growth their strengths and their achievements? Is the evidence recent? Is it consistent throughout the employment history? If so, it is likely that the organization, large or small, profit or non-profit oriented, is using "the best safety management tool".

For further information or assistance, contact your Zenith Safety & Health Consultant.

SUGGESTIONS FOR ADDITIONAL READING:

Drucker, Peter F., *The Effective Executive*, Harper & Row Publishers, New York, Chapters 3 and 5.

Drucker, Peter F., *The Practice of Management*, Harper & Row Publishers, New York, Chapter 23.

Boyd, Bradford B., *Management Minded Supervision*, McGraw-Hill Book Company, New York, Chapters 5 through 8.

Evans, Richard I., *B. F. Skinner -- The Man and His Ideas*, E. P. Dutton & Company, New York, Chapter 2.

Skinner, B. F., *Beyond Freedom & Dignity*, Alfred Knopf, New York, Chapters 3 through 5.

SAMPLE STANDARDS

The following are examples of positive actions that reinforce the safety message:

MANAGERS

1. Will have a positive attitude about safety!
2. Each will communicate to his/her department its accident results at a five-minute meeting on the first working day of every month. Attendance is to be taken at meetings, a copy of which will be sent to the President and will be kept with the Illness and Injury Prevention manual.
3. Each will provide supervisors in his/her area with proper lifting techniques training as prescribed by the Personnel Officer.
4. Each will provide supervisors in his/her area with a thorough orientation to company safety rules. Each orientation is to be documented for inclusion in the supervisor's personnel folder.

SUPERVISORS

1. Will have a positive attitude about safety!
2. Each will hold a five-minute safety meeting with his/her employees each Monday to discuss the specific topic to be provided by the Personnel Officer. Meeting records will be kept in the Illness and Injury Prevention manual to document attendance and topics discussed.
3. Each will interview every worker who reports an accident or "near-miss" to discover the specific causes and correct measures in each instance. An accident investigation report will be completed.
4. Each will nominate one "Safety Employee of the Month" from his/her department, following guidelines provided by the Personnel Officer.
5. After providing an initial training session in his/her area, each will practice with employees and actively promote the use of proper lifting techniques as instructed in the special Manager/Supervisor classes. The initial training and subsequent monthly practice sessions are to be documented and maintained in the employee personnel folder and the Illness and Injury Prevention manual.
6. Each will stage a five-minute work station clean-up at the close of each shift.

EMPLOYEES

1. Each will actively participate in the safety program!
2. Each will observe all prescribed company safety rules.
3. Each will use the company's safe lifting procedures.
4. Each will attend weekly safety meetings and all safety training sessions as prescribed by his/her supervisor.
5. Employees will report hazards to their supervisor. Injuries will also be reported immediately.
6. TEAMWORK — all employees will help each other!