

Business and Industry Have Found That Positive Supervision Works!

Educational supervisors should use positive reinforcement techniques proven successful in business and industry.

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Businesses are finding that positive reinforcement is a useful tool in management and supervision. Emery Air Freight tried the new approach in 1969 in connection with problems in their customer service and packaging divisions and later extended the experiment to cover all their employees. Since then, Michigan Bell, General Electric, Weyerhaeuser, B.F. Goodrich, Warner-Lambert and many other businesses have used positive reinforcement successfully.

Traditionally, industrial supervisors have tried to change the behavior of employees by threatening and pressuring them. Angry words, suspensions, demotions, transfers, and dockings are the ammunition of the traditional supervisor. In positive

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management, the supervisor tries instead to identify and reinforce employee behaviors consistent with the goals of the organization.

Positive management requires that goals be defined as changes in behavior or performance. Target behaviors are usually identified by analyzing employee performance on those operations where improvement is desired. In the original Emery experiment, for example, management was interested in saving air freight charges. This could be accomplished if small packages bound for the same destination were placed in special containers and shipped as a single unit, rather than separately. Through observation it was found that workers used the containers for only 45 per-

cent of all possible shipments. The resulting behavioral goal was to increase the frequency with which employees used the containers.

At Western Airlines, management sought to increase the percentage of phone callers who actually made flight reservations. The behavioral goal was to improve the ratio of reservations to total callers. Other behavioral goals typical of business and industry included reducing customer complaints, decreasing absenteeism, and reducing violations of plant safety rules.

Behavioral goals can also be set for management and supervisory personnel. Weyerhaeuser established such goals as reducing the number of critical remarks made to workers and increasing positive remarks when praise was warranted.

Once behavioral goals have been

established, the supervisor applies the Skinnerian principle that behavior which is reinforced is strengthened (occurs more frequently). Managers and supervisors use the principle by finding ways to reinforce the desired behaviors when they occur.

Praise is an effective reinforcer. Michigan Bell Maintenance Services used praise to reinforce behaviors that led to improvements in safety, service, cost performance, and attendance.

Feedback, or giving information about performance levels, is also widely used with good results. When informed about the percentage of billing rate errors, employees of Collins Foods International reduced error rates from 8 percent to less than 0.2 percent. The Western Airlines supervisors who wanted to increase phone reservations used a combination of praise and feedback that resulted in an increase in reservations from 25 percent of all callers to 50 percent. Feedback has the advantage of immediacy, an important element since positive reinforcement is more effective when it closely follows the desired behavior.

Other reinforcers used by business and industry include granting time off, participating in lotteries, sharing in increased profits, and moving to more interesting jobs.

In education, teachers have used positive reinforcement in the classroom to strengthen a wide variety of behaviors associated with pupil learning and growth. However, there are few reports of the systematic use of positive reinforcement by educational administrators and supervisors. Educators seem to be reluctant to use a management tool popularly considered to be a method for shap-

ing behavior or asserting unconscious control over others.

Perhaps more important is the difficulty of identifying an appropriate dependent variable against which efforts of supervisors can be measured. In business and industry, the objective is usually to increase the frequency of behaviors associated with more production or better service. By analogy then, an intervention by the educational supervisor should lead to higher achievement by students. Just as the industrial manager reinforces employee behaviors that lead to increased production, profits, and service, the educational leader reinforces teacher behaviors associated with pupil growth.

Using measures of pupil performance as a criterion variable assumes that the supervisor has a thorough understanding of education; that relationships between teaching acts, learning environments, and particular student outcomes are known and can be applied. Thus, given student objectives the supervisor helps teachers to establish appropriate learning environments for their attainment.

For example, research has shown that where students are required to meet memory objectives, drill and repetition, massed and spaced practice, and feedback are important factors for learning. The supervisor can reinforce the teacher's behavior (frequent use of these practices in the classroom) and measure the success of the reinforcement (student achievement). Reinforcement can be in the form of positive comments, personal or peer recognition, or any other suitable reward. Of course, the most significant and satisfying reinforcement is the teacher's own knowledge that students are learning, so

frequent feedback on student achievement is a highly appropriate form of reinforcement.

While use of positive reinforcement by educational supervisors does restrict teachers' freedom somewhat, teachers still retain a large measure of professional autonomy. For one, they continue to have a strong voice in establishing learning goals for students. For another, they can still apply methods according to their own strengths and personalities. For example, even when use of advanced organizers or drill and repetition is called for, they may apply these techniques in a variety of ways.

It does not necessarily follow that what works for business and industry will work for education, but educators should give serious attention to an idea that offers solid promise for improving student learning.

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