

On My Mind...The Power of Positive Reinforcement

By Jeri Mae Rowley

On my mind lately is the most powerful motivational tool we have in our business tool box...positive reinforcement! People want to hear how valuable they are, how important their work is, and what great work they have done. And they are happy to hear it again, and again, and again. Bob Nelson, author of the bestseller *1001 Ways to Reward Employees*, reminds us that the key to encouraging people to do more good, productive things is gratitude. Gratitude, praise, admiration, kudos, congratulations, compliments, commendation, celebration, appreciation, and encouragement are all words for positive reinforcement.



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Positive reinforcement, according to human motivation theory, gets people to repeat good behavior. If you do something good, and I praise you, then you will do it again. Praise is great. Positive reinforcement is even better.

Praise is catching someone doing something right and saying things like “Good job,” “Way to go,” or “Nice work.” To take praise up a notch and make it positive reinforcement, your acknowledgement needs to have three elements. First, positive reinforcement happens immediately after the behavior. Second, positive reinforcement is sincere and personalized. And third, positive reinforcement describes specifically the behavior you liked and would like repeated.

Don’t be stingy with praise. If there are *any* behaviors you like, let people know. You can even praise people for “just doing their job.” I like to tell this story to students when we are discussing positive reinforcement.

When my daughter, Sarah, was three we were shopping one day and she asked “Can I have a hot dog?” If she’s three and she’s hungry, and I’m her mom, what’s my job? Feed her, right?

I took her to Dairy Queen and made the purchase. After she meticulously spread ketchup and relish on her hot dog, she raised it to her mouth. But, before she even took one bite, she put the hot dog back down on the table, looked me in the eye, and said “Mommy, I am so proud of you for buying me this hot dog. You are such a good mommy.”

When I ask students what they think she was up to, the most common replies are “she wants something more,” and “manipulating mommy.” The answer is that she is using all three key elements of positive reinforcement. She praised me *immediately* after my behavior, *sincerely*, and described *specifically* what I did to please her. And, she praised me even though I was just doing my job.

She was taking a moment of her time to thank me for buying her something. My theory is that she’s investing in my future behavior. In the future, when Sarah wants me to buy something for her...

The idea that it only takes “a moment to praise” is detailed in Ken Blanchard’s *One Minute Manager*. Blanchard identifies seven steps for effective “One Minute Praising:”

1. Tell people up front that you are going to let them know how they are doing.
2. Praise people immediately.
3. Tell people what they did right---be specific.
4. Tell people how good you feel about what they did right, and how it helps the organization and the other people who work there.
5. Stop for a moment of silence to let them “*feel*” how good you feel.
6. Encourage them to do more of the same.
7. Shake hands or touch people in a way that makes it clear that you support their success.

In the Wall Street Journal Best Seller *Love 'Em or Lose 'Em: Getting Good People to Stay*, the authors give a model for “Just-in Time Encouragement:” Recognize, Specify, and Mobilize.

Each of the three steps encourages, but all three combined are a much more powerful positive reinforcement. For example, an employee or coworker shows you a brochure she’s designed. Below are three levels of Just-in Time Encouragement.

Recognize “You did a great job.” (Good)

Recognize and Specify “You did a great job, I like the graphics and I think our customers will like the easy-to-read font.” (Better)

Recognize and Specify and Mobilize “You did a great job, I like the graphics and I think our customers will like the easy-to-read font. I’d like to show it to the marketing team. Would you like to do more of this work? Let’s see if Fred in Graphics has any design training coming up.” (Best)

Well, we’re at the end of this article on positive reinforcement. It’s time for me to walk my talk. Thank you so much for reading this article. I hope you will help others by using the powerful interpersonal skill of positive reinforcement that: is offered immediately after the behavior, is both sincere and personalized, and, clearly describes what they did well (and should repeat).

Jeri Mae Rowley, M.S. Human Resource Management, is a popular speaker, trainer and facilitator. By weaving together her unique humor and storytelling skills, Jeri Mae helps individuals and organizations improve leadership, communications, and customer service. Participants in her programs often comment: “She’s not boring!”

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