



Trust and Reinforcement

by Bob Whipple, MBA, CPLP

In groups with high trust, management attempts to reinforce workers usually work well. People are appreciative that management notices good performance and expends effort to recognize them. Since reinforcement is one of the best ways to shape future performance, any organization that has high trust between management and the workers has a significant advantage.

In groups with low trust, attempts to reinforce workers are often met with apathy or suspicion, and they frequently backfire. This reaction happens because of the low trust, and workers feel the reinforcement is likely some form of manipulation. Here is an example of how an attempt to reinforce workers did not work well.

Marvin was the big boss in the organization where I worked. He wanted to reinforce a group of employees who had put in a lot of overtime over several weeks. He asked the manager to buy theater tickets for everyone in the department. The problem was that he failed to provide a similar reinforcement to another department who worked in the same building and had put in similar crazy hours. So by trying to reinforce one group, Marvin caused significant loss of motivation in the other. It was an ugly scene, and he tried to smooth things by buying tickets for the second department, but the damage had already been done.

Although reinforcement is a powerful way to improve performance if done well, it can be a minefield if there is not a basis for trust behind it because it feels manipulative. People ask “what is he up to now,” or say “there must be something more he wants from us,” or “uh oh, he is trying to butter us up to tell us some bad news.”

Often thoughtless leaders try to reinforce workers from their own personal perspective rather than the perspective of the workers themselves. An example is the supervisor who decided to have an ice cream social to celebrate a production milestone. He had forgotten that over half of the workers had signed a pledge to lose 20% of their weight in an effort toward better health. Most of the workers boycotted the social, and the hapless

supervisor ended up with the scoop in his hand and a lot of melted ice cream. Worse, his crude attempt to celebrate with the workers made him the laughing stock of the production area.

Here are six ways that well-intended managers blow it when trying to reinforce workers:

1. Reinforcing too much with trinkets like t-shirts or hats, etc.
2. Being insincere when reinforcing
3. Having the reward something the workers really don't want – like the ice cream story
4. Unfair application of rewards where one person or group is favored over others
5. Recognition not timely to the actions that caused them
6. Automatic or mechanical reinforcement that does not come from the heart

Exercise for you: Think about your own successes and failures when trying to reinforce people. Try to pinpoint the root cause of why any problems occurred. Think about what could have been done differently to prevent the resulting loss of motivation. With effort, you can usually spot the error in logic and the cure. This gives you a chance to apologize and not make the same type of mistake in the future.

Reinforcement is a powerful method of improving performance, but only if it is done with skill. Having high trust is a great enabler of effective reinforcement. It helps managers avoid the many pitfalls that can happen.

The preceding was derived from an episode in "Building Trust," a 30 part video series by Bob Whipple "The Trust Ambassador." To view three short (3 minutes each) examples at no cost go to <http://www.avanoo.com/first3/517>

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