

## Ubiquitous Reinforcement

Robert Whipple, MBA CPLP

The most effective way to get people to perform in a certain way is to reward performance that is in the direction you wish and disregard performance that is not. Two other important concepts are to establish an environment of trust up front, and gently shape impending wrong behavior toward some activity that can be positively reinforced. These concepts are documented Ken Blanchard's book, *Whale Done*, published in 2002.

When people are properly reinforced, they develop habits of doing the right things because it makes them feel good. The reinforcement becomes intrinsic. People are doing their best at all times, not just when the boss has a chance to witness it.

Of all the tools at a leader's command, positive reinforcement is by far the most powerful. Yet reinforcement can be a minefield of potential problems, and many leaders, after getting burnt, become reluctant to use it. By avoiding reinforcement, they ignore the most powerful correcting force available to them. A good analogy is when a military pilot flies a fighter jet. The way to get a fighter jet to do what you want is to carefully control the stick at all times. Reinforcement at work is like the stick of a fighter jet. If we are not skillful at using it, the results can be destabilizing or even disastrous, but that's no reason to let go of the stick. We simply need to train everyone to use reinforcement often, learn from any mistakes along the way, and use reinforcement to enhance intrinsic motivation.

It is sad that many attempts at positive reinforcement actually lower motivation. You have probably experienced this yourself, either on the sending or receiving end, and it can be very frustrating. There are four reasons why positive reinforcement can have a negative impact.

**1. Overdone Tangible Reinforcement** – The over use of trinkets, buttons, T-shirts, or stickers to reinforce every positive action gets old quickly. When using tangible rewards, keep the volume and variety to a reasonable level to maintain their impact. Check to see if people are rolling their eyes when given a trinket.

**2. Insincere Reinforcing** – Insincerity is transparent. When a manager says nice things about you that do not come from the heart, you know it instantly. It reduces his credibility. When reinforcing others, don't say something because it sounds good, say it because it feels true.

**3. Not Perceived as Reinforcing** - What people find reinforcing is a matter of individual taste. When leaders reinforce using their own frame of reference rather than that of the recipient, it often ends in frustration. Find out what would really reinforce the

other person by asking. Don't give a doughnut to a person on a strict diet. That sounds obvious, but that kind of mistake happens all the time.

**4. Reinforcement Perceived as Unfair** - Of all the reasons for not reinforcing well, the issue of fairness spreads out like a nuclear cloud after a bomb blast. Leaders get burnt on this issue once, and it colors reinforcing patterns from then on. If they reinforce Sally publicly, it makes her feel good, but tends to turn off Joe and Mark, who believe they did more than she did. That is why the "employee of the month" concept often backfires. It sets up a kind of implied competition where one person is singled out for attention. That person is perceived to "win" at the expense of others who think they "lose." How do you fight this?

Create a win-win atmosphere rather than win-lose. Focus more on group performance, where the whole group is reinforced with special mention to some key players. Have the employees themselves nominate people singled out for attention. Group nomination feels better than having the boss "play God," trying to figure out who made the biggest contribution. It is a tricky area.

You can never overdo sincere reinforcement in an organization. The best reinforcement approach is to make it ubiquitous and continuous. The word ubiquitous comes from the Latin root, *ubique*, which means everywhere. It was originally a theological expression used to describe the omnipresence of Christ. In this context, it means that reinforcement should exist everywhere in an organization and be encountered constantly.

### **Developing a Reinforcing Culture**

Thus far, we have discussed personal reinforcements for a job well done. This is important, but it pales compared with the power of developing a reinforcing culture at all levels. That culture is a social norm that encourages everyone to honestly appreciate each other and say so as often as possible.

Many groups struggle in a kind of hell where people hate and try to undermine one another at every turn. They snipe at each other and "blow people in," just to see them suffer or to get even for some perceived sin done to them. What an awful environment to live and work in, yet it is far too common.

Contrast this with a group that builds each other up and delights in each other's successes. These groups have much more fun. They enjoy interfacing with their comrades at work. They are also about twice as productive! You see them together outside work for social events, and there are close family-type relationships in evidence. Hugging is spontaneous.

As a leader, you want to develop this second kind of atmosphere, but how? A good place to start is with yourself. Make sure you are practicing positive reinforcement in a way that others see and recognize. Create an atmosphere where everyone understands and places high value on effective reinforcement. Become a model of reinforcement, and praise those in your organization who excel at it. One good technique is to have the leader encourage reinforcing notes within the organization and ask to receive a copy of each note. By reviewing the notes and publicly giving praise to both

the sender and receivers, the method will quickly spread and perpetuate itself. The speed and ease of e-mail facilitates these notes of praise.

At the same time, leaders need to encourage verbal reinforcement that is not documented. Any time someone sees another person doing something right, she should be encouraged to offer praise. Especially important are the “thank you” any time a person goes out of his or her way to help someone. The key is to create the culture at all levels. It isn’t enough for just the boss or a few supervisors to reinforce people. Teach *everyone* to do it. That multiplies the impact by however many people you have. As the culture develops, you’ll see it spreading to other parts of the organization. People will begin to notice your area is much more positive and productive than before. It will sparkle, and upper management will start asking how you did it.

A reinforcing culture transforms an organization from a “what’s wrong” mindset to one of “what’s right.” The positive energy benefits everyone as the quality of work life is significantly enhanced. In addition, the quality and quantity of work increases dramatically because you have harnessed energy previously lost in bickering and put it into positive work toward the vision. What an uplifting way to increase productivity! ***Instead of beating on people and constantly dwelling on the negative, you’ll be generating good feelings and loyalty while you drive productivity to new heights.*** That is worth doing and easy to accomplish!

Don’t get discouraged if you make a mistake in reinforcing. Sometimes you will. It is an area of significant peril, but its power is immense. Continually monitor your success level with reinforcement. Talk about it openly and work to improve the culture. Consider every mistake a learning event for everyone, especially yourself. Often these are comical in nature – like throwing another pizza party when everyone is sick of pizza.

Let your reinforcement be joyous and spontaneous. Let people help you make it special. Reinforcement is the most powerful elixir available to a leader. Don’t shy away from it because it’s difficult or you’ve made mistakes in the past.

*The preceding information was adapted from the book **The TRUST Factor: Advanced Leadership for Professionals**, by Robert Whipple. It is available on [www.leadergrow.com](http://www.leadergrow.com).*

*Robert Whipple is also the author of **Leading with Trust is like Sailing Downwind** and, **Understanding E-Body Language: Building Trust Online**. Bob consults and speaks on these and other leadership topics. He is CEO of Leadergrow Inc. a company dedicated to growing leaders. Contact Bob at [bwhipple@leadergrow.com](mailto:bwhipple@leadergrow.com) or 585-392-7763.*

The  
**TRUST**  
Ambassador