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C. W. VonBergen

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Dr. C. W. VonBergen
Southeastern Oklahoma State University

The theme for the 2012 Administrative Issues Journal Academic Conference is "Seizing Opportunities" which suggests the importance of being proactive. People high in proactive personality "identify opportunities and act on them, show initiative, take action, and persevere until meaningful changes occur" (Crant, 2000, p. 439). Much research has confirmed that being proactive is associated with positive organizational outcomes including career success (e.g., Seibert, Crant, & Kraimer, 1999; Van Dyne & LePine, 1998; job performance (Crant, 1995; Thompson, 2005), innovation and creativity (Parker, Williams, & Turner, 2006), and entrepreneurship (Becherer & Maurer, 1999). Proactive leaders intervene in response either to good or to poor performance (Tejeda, Scandura, & Pillai, 2001).

In contrast, people low in proactive personality do not challenge the status quo, fail to identify opportunities, show little initiative, avoid decisions, delay responses, hesitate to take action, resist expressing views, are absent when needed, and only passively adapt to their work conditions. These attributes appear to characterize laissez-faire leaders (Hinkin & Schriesheim, 2008; Judge & Piccolo, 2008). According to Lewin, Lippitt, and White (1939), laissez-faire leadership represents a management approach where the leader has been nominated and still physically occupies the leadership position, but where he or she has more or less abdicated the responsibilities and duties assigned to him or her.

Laissez-faire leaders do nothing and this omission has negative consequences for firms (Skogstad, Einarsen, Torsheim, Aasland, & Hetland, 2007) although many supervisors seldom realize this since they typically think "that doing nothing will have no effect on performance" (Hellriegel & Slocum, 2007, p. 103). Nevertheless, when supervisors do not act following worker behavior they often demotivate good performers and frequently encourage poor workers. Those who practice "if you don't hear from me you know you are doing fine" (Hinkin & Schriesheim, 2004, p. 365) may be doing more harm than they suspect. Such managers change that performance for the worse in one of two ways: 1) they decrease the probability of future desired behavior, and 2) they open the door for increased levels of undesired performance.

Management Nonresponse to Desirable Employee Performance

Pithers (1985) found that the lack of appropriate reinforcement following a desired behavior resulted in a decline in performance over time. A leader who withholds reinforcement (e.g., praise), whether intentionally or unintentionally, may very well produce negative consequences. This finding is supported in studies by Hinkin and Schriesheim (2008). Additionally, Howell and Costley (2006) and Komaki (1998) noted that nonreinforced subordinate good performance leads to negative subordinate affective and behavioral responses (e.g., dissatisfaction and decreases in performance), and Skogstad et al. (2007) found that when a superior ignores legitimate expectations from subordinates by lack of presence, involvement, feedback, and rewards, such behaviors may negatively influence subordinates' role experiences.

Management attention is a major positive consequence for the vast majority of the work force (Daniels, 1994), and if missing, then extinction may unintentionally occur which means that the productive behavior will decrease because it was overlooked. While extinction can be technically defined as the withdrawal of positive reinforcement from a behavior previously rewarded (Luthans & Kreitner, 1985), the concept may be easier to understand as a condition in which "the performer does something and nothing happens" (Daniels, 1994, p. 29). When people do something resulting in no reinforcement, they will be less likely to repeat that behavior in the future or, as Skinner (1953) pointed out, "… when we engage in behavior which no longer 'pays off,' we find ourselves less inclined to behave that way again" (p. 69). "Just ignore it, and it'll go away" (Daniels, 1994, p. 62) is basically how extinction works. A good analogy for extinction is to imagine what would happen to a person's houseplants if they stopped watering them. Like a plant without water, a behavior without (occasional) reinforcement eventually dies and disappears. In each case, the behavior decreases because reinforcing consequences no longer occur. These examples show that doing nothing after someone behaves properly and positively can weaken and eliminate that worthy behavior.

Management nonresponse to employee productive work behavior is equivalent to extinction which decades of research has shown results in gradual decreases of behavior. Thus, doing nothing, often described as ignoring good performance in organizational contexts, either consciously or unconsciously, decreases the frequency of effective conduct. The problem with extinction is that the process cannot generally be directly observed. Since extinction remains a passive process, supervisors may not notice anything happening immediately, but, slowly, over time, the desirable behavior changes for the worse. Every time a worker does something positive and nothing happens, that behavior weakens. Eventually, previously industrious employees do just enough to not get fired, leaving supervisors wondering what happened with those formerly promising workers.

Great organizations create greater success by praising and celebrating good performance, that is, by positive reinforcement. Recognizing achievements and milestones boosts pride, camaraderie, and leadership credibility. By providing occasions to acknowledge, recognize, and reward meaningful accomplishments, leaders create a culture where progress and appreciation prevail. Employee recognition and positive reinforcement must be given more attention by leaders as they attempt to meet today's organizational challenges.

Management Nonresponse to Undesirable Employee Performance

The key learning point above is that organizational stars and those who perform their job satisfactorily should get constructive notice from their supervisors. While good performers should receive managerial attention, a firm's poor performers deserve lots of attention too—perhaps even more than their productive coworkers. However, the impact of ignoring undesirable behavior is different than overlooking desirable conduct. Ignoring undesirable behavior generally tends to maintain or increase ineffective and inefficient actions. This could be because the wrongdoing is often self-rewarding to a worker and involves an activity the person already finds intrinsically satisfying. For instance, an employee who steals money from a firm experiences the naturally occurring positive consequence associated with having more money which will cause the undesirable behavior to persist because the worker continues to be positively reinforced for their theft. Moreover, many managers often ignore or are reluctant to provide negative feedback to others because the discussion of poor performance is apparently so aversive that it is often neglected (Landy & Farr, 1980). This frequently leads to future, more serious problems as well as spreading to others in the workgroup who may model the undesirable performance. Indeed, when ignored, minor problems often turn into major difficulties.

Furthermore, supervisory silence about wrongdoing might often be interpreted by workers as subtle acceptance and consent (from the Latin maxim, 'Qui tacet consentire videtur' ['He who is silent seems to consent']) and thus may act as an unintended reinforcer for the behavior supervisors do not want (Daniels & Daniels, 2004). The absence of accurate and negative feedback frequently leads employees to believe their performance to be on target and that everything is well (Tata, 2002). While managers tend to assume that employees are aware that they are not doing an acceptable job, employees think differently and assume that everything is fine unless they are told otherwise (Bruce, 2012).

Ignoring bad behavior invariably culminates in disillusionment from the very people the business relies most upon—those who consistently produce good results. Research by Schnake and Dumler (1989) supported this view and found that supervisors who fail to discipline others' inappropriate behavior is often perceived as punishment by those performing at high levels and that leaders who punish unwanted employee behavior is frequently viewed as rewarding by these good performers. In a similar vein, Podsakoff, Bommer, Podsakoff, and MacKenzie (2006) found that negative feedback provided by managers to poorly performing workers can have functional effects on employee performance and satisfaction. It appears that employees generally feel better about their supervisor, coworkers, and opportunities for advancement when their leaders hold employees accountable for poor performance.

Summary

Managers seldom recognize the dramatic impact of their own failure to act on their subordinates and that many performance issues are created not only by what supervisors do but also by what they do not do. Inaction with respect to desirable worker performance often results in extinction which reduces future positive conduct. Likewise, ignoring inappropriate employee behavior can lead employees to believe their poor performance to be at satisfactory levels because management neglects to tell them otherwise. There is a high cost of doing nothing which demonstrates that subordinates may be as sensitive to the reinforcement or discipline that they do not receive as they are to the rewards and punishments that they do receive. Managers must appropriately respond either to good or to poor worker performance. Not seizing opportunities to provide suitable consequences to employee conduct is one way laissez-faire leaders destroy organizations. There is a very high price of supervisory inaction.

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