

11.4: Reinforcement Theory

Learning Outcome

- Explain reinforcement theory

In contrast to some other motivational theories, reinforcement theory ignores the inner state of the individual. Instead it focuses on what happens to an individual when he or she performs some task or action. Reinforcement theorists see behavior as being environmentally controlled. Rather than internal thoughts or desires, the theory is that behaviors are controlled by reinforcers—any consequence that, when immediately following a response, increases the probability that the behavior will be repeated. For example, you decided to work over the weekend to finish a project early for your boss. When your boss finds out about your extra effort, she thanks you and buys you lunch. Assuming your boss's reactions were favorable to you, you will be more likely to do similar deeds in the future. If your boss said or did nothing to acknowledge your extra work, you would be less likely to demonstrate similar behavior in the future.

Regardless of the simplicity of reinforcement theory, there are lessons to be learned from proper and improper reward or recognition for behavior. Think of how you would react if you consistently went above and beyond at work and received no reinforcement. Is it possible that you might start believing that you were wasting your time? Or what if a teammate is consistently disruptive and disrespectful, even to the boss, yet is never reprimanded? Might that teammate continue, even increase, his or her disruptive behavior?

Practice Question

<https://assessments.lumenlearning.co...essments/12281>

Reinforcement theory can be useful if you think of it in combination with other theories, such as goal-setting. If you worked on a team at Microsoft in the 1990s, you were given difficult tasks to create and ship software on a very strict deadline. Because you knew the requirements of working there, and you loved the opportunity to challenge yourself, you were energized to perform. Because Microsoft valued shipping software on time, you were “fabulously rewarded,” which could mean hundreds or even thousands of stock options, if you completed your work.

Although reinforcement theory seems straightforward, a manager who uses reinforcement risks offending his employees. Employees might feel the manager is treating them like children or dogs and not giving them the respect due an adult. This video clip from the *Big Bang Theory* television show illustrates reinforcement. Notice that Leonard forbids Sheldon from using reinforcement on Penny and himself.

A link to an interactive elements can be found at the bottom of this page.

You can [view the transcript for “Positive Reinforcement – The Big Bang Theory” here \(opens in new window\)](#).

Contributors and Attributions

CC licensed content, Original

- Reinforcement Theory. **Authored by:** David J. Thompson and Lumen Learning. **License:** [CC BY: Attribution](#)

This page titled [11.4: Reinforcement Theory](#) is shared under a [CC BY 4.0](#) license and was authored, remixed, and/or curated by [Lumen Learning](#) via [source content](#) that was edited to the style and standards of the LibreTexts platform.