

8.29: Reinforcement Theory

Learning Objectives

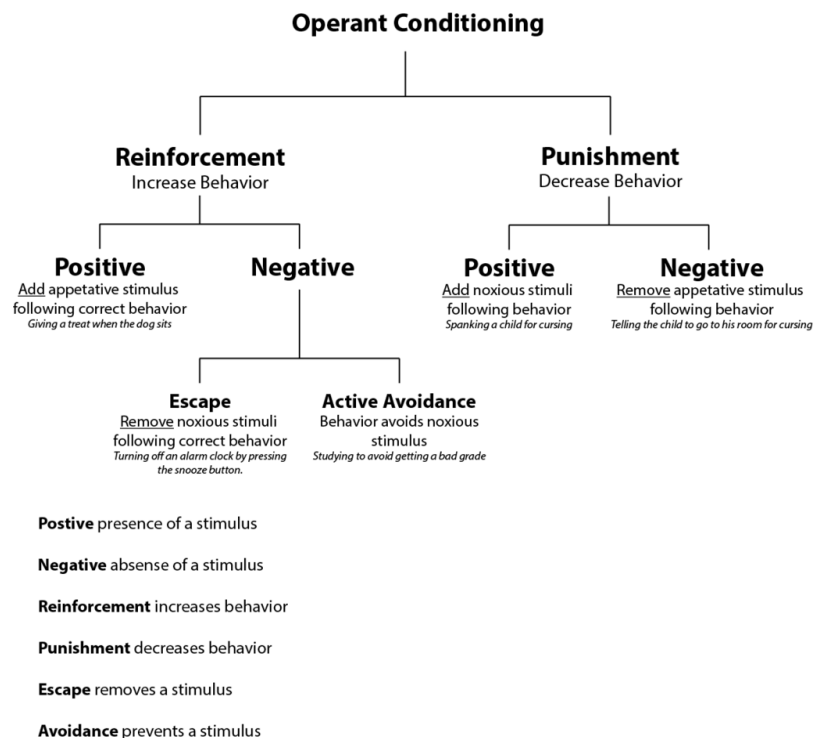
- Explain how reinforcement theory can be used as a management tool



The basic premise of the theory of reinforcement is both simple and intuitive: An individual's behavior is a function of the consequences of that behavior. You can think of it as simple cause and effect. If I work hard today, I'll make more money. If I make more money, I'm more likely to want to work hard. Such a scenario creates behavioral reinforcement, where the desired behavior is enabled and promoted by the desired outcome of a behavior.

Reinforcement theory is based on work done by **B. F. Skinner** in the field of operant conditioning. The theory relies on four primary inputs, or aspects of operant conditioning, from the external environment. These four inputs are **positive reinforcement**, **negative reinforcement**, **positive punishment**, and **negative punishment**.

This following chart shows the various pathways of operant conditioning, which can be established via reinforcement and punishment (both positive and negative for each).



Reinforcement

Positive reinforcement attempts to increase the frequency of a behavior by rewarding that behavior. For example, if an employee identifies a new market opportunity that creates profit, an organization may give her a bonus. This will positively reinforce the desired behavior.

Negative reinforcement, on the other hand, attempts to increase the frequency of a behavior by removing something the individual doesn't like. For example, an employee demonstrates a strong work ethic and wraps up a few projects faster than expected. This employee happens to have a long commute. The manager tells the employee to go ahead and work from home for a few days, considering how much progress she has made. This is an example of removing a negative stimulus as way of reinforcing a behavior.

Reinforcement can be affected by various factors, including the following:

- **Satiation:** the degree of need. If an employee is quite wealthy, for example, it may not be particularly reinforcing (or motivating) to offer a bonus.
- **Immediacy:** the time elapsed between the desired behavior and the reinforcement. The shorter the time between the two, the more likely it is that the employee will correlate the reinforcement with the behavior. If an employee does something great but isn't rewarded until two months after, he or she may not connect the desired behavior with the outcome. The reinforcement loses meaning and power.
- **Size:** the magnitude of a reward or punishment can have a big effect on the degree of response. For example, a bigger bonus often has a bigger impact (to an extent; see the satiation factor, above).

In a management context, reinforcers include salary increases, bonuses, promotions, variable incomes, flexible work hours, and paid sabbaticals. Managers are responsible for identifying the behaviors that should be promoted, the ones that should be discouraged, and carefully considering how those behaviors relate to organizational objectives. Implementing rewards and punishments that are aligned with the organization's goals helps to create a more consistent, efficient work culture.

One particularly common positive-reinforcement technique is the incentive program, a formal scheme used to promote or encourage specific actions, behaviors, or results from employees during a defined period of time. Incentive programs can reduce turnover, boost morale and loyalty, improve wellness, increase retention, and drive daily performance among employees. Motivating staff can, in turn, help businesses increase productivity and meet goals.

To maximize the impact of such a reinforcement, every feature of the incentive program must be tailored to the participants' interests. A successful incentive program contains clearly defined rules, suitable rewards, efficient communication strategies, and measurable success metrics. By adapting each element of the program to fit the target audience, companies are better able to engage participating employees and enhance the overall program efficacy.

Punishment

Positive punishment is conditioning at its most straightforward: identifying a negative behavior and providing an adverse stimulus to discourage future occurrences. A simple example would be suspending an employee for inappropriate behavior.

The purpose of punishment is to prevent future occurrences of a particular socially unacceptable or undesirable behavior. According to deterrence theory, the awareness of a punishment can prevent people from engaging in the behavior. This can be accomplished either by punishing someone immediately after the undesirable behavior, so they are reluctant to do it again, or by educating people about the punishment preemptively, so they are inclined not to engage in the behavior at all. In a management context, punishment tools can include demotions, salary cuts, and terminations.

Reinforcement and Punishment in IT

Let's look at an IT sales team for a couple examples. The team's overarching goal is to sell their new software to businesses. The manager may want to emphasize sales to partners of a certain size (i.e., big contracts). To this end, the manager may reward team members who gain clients of 5,000 or more employees with a commission of 5 percent of the overall sales volume for each such partner. This reward reinforces the behavior of closing big contracts, strongly motivating team members to work toward that goal, and likely increases the total number of big contracts closed.

Negative punishment entails the removal or withholding of something in order to condition a response. For example, Nicole, an employee in the IT department prefers to work unconventional hours, from 10:30 a.m. to 7 p.m. However, her performance has been suffering lately. A negative punishment would be to revoke her right to keep the preferred schedule until performance improves.

In business organizations, punishment and deterrence theory play a vital role in shaping the work culture to be in line with operational expectations and to avoid conflicts and negative outcomes both internally and externally. If employees know exactly what they are *not* supposed to do, and they understand the possible repercussions of violating those expectations, they will

generally try to avoid crossing the line. Prevention is a much cheaper and easier approach than waiting for something bad to happen, so preemptive education regarding rules—and the penalties for violations—is common practice, especially in the area of business ethics.

? Practice Question

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