

4.4: Behavioral Self-Management

4. How can employees be trained to assume more responsibility for self-improvement and job performance with the goal of creating a work environment characterized by continual self-learning and employee development?

The second managerial technique for shaping learned behavior in the workplace is *behavioral self-management* (or BSM). Behavioral self-management is the process of modifying one's own behavior by systematically managing cues, cognitive processes, and contingent consequences.¹⁸ BSM is an approach to learning and behavioral change that relies on the individual to take the initiative in controlling the change process. The emphasis here is on "behavior" (because our focus is on changing behaviors), not attitudes, values, or personality. Although similar to behavior modification, BSM differs in one important respect: there is a heavy emphasis on cognitive processes, reflecting the influence of Bandura's social learning theory.

The Self-Regulation Process

Underlying BSM is a firm belief that individuals are capable of self-control; if they want to change their behavior (whether it is to come to work on time, quit smoking, lose weight, etc.), it is possible through a process called **self-regulation**, as depicted in **Exhibit 4.10**.¹⁹ According to the model, people tend to go about their day's activities fairly routinely until something unusual or unexpected occurs. At this point, the individual initiates the self-regulation process by entering into **self-monitoring** (Stage 1). In this stage, the individual tries to identify the problem. For example, if your supervisor told you that your choice of clothing was unsuitable for the office, you would more than likely focus your attention on your clothes.

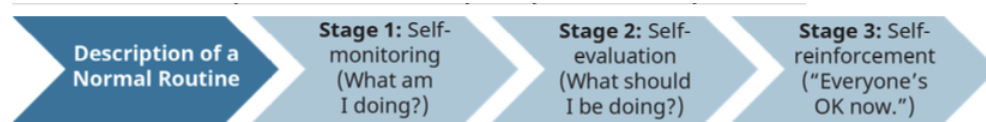


Exhibit 4.10 Kanfer's Model of Self-Regulation

Next, in Stage 2, or *self-evaluation*, you would consider what you should be wearing. Here, you would compare what you have on to acceptable standards that you learned from colleagues, other relevant role models, and advertising, for example. Finally, after evaluating the situation and taking corrective action if necessary, you would assure yourself that the disruptive influence had passed and everything was now fine. This phase (Stage 3) is called **self-reinforcement**. You are now able to return to your normal routine. This self-regulation process forms the foundation for BSM.

Self-Management in Practice

When we combine the above self-regulation model with social learning theory (discussed earlier), we can see how the self-management process works. As shown in **Exhibit 4.11**, four interactive factors must be considered. These are *situational cues*, *the person*, *behaviors*, and *consequences*.²⁰ (Note that the arrows in this diagram go in both directions to reflect the two-way process among these four factors.)

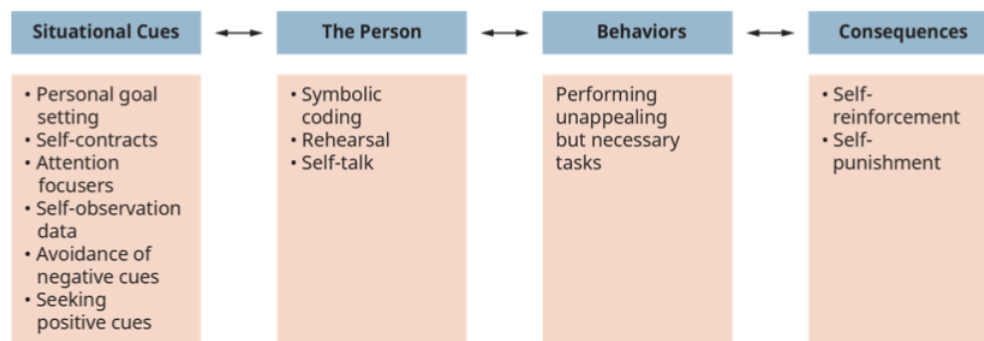


Exhibit 4.11 A Social Learning Theory Model of Self-Management

Situational Cues. In attempting to change any behavior, people respond to the cues surrounding them. One reason it is so hard for some people to give up smoking is the constant barrage of advertisements on billboards, in magazines, and so forth. There are too many cues reminding people to smoke. However, situational cues can be turned to our advantage when using BSM. That is, through the use of six kinds of cue (shown in **Exhibit 4.11**, column 1), people can set forth a series of positive reminders and goals concerning the desired behaviors. These reminders serve to focus our attention on what we are trying to accomplish. Hence, a

person who is trying to quit smoking would (1) avoid any contact with smokers or smoking ads, (2) seek information on the hazards of smoking, (3) set a personal goal of quitting, and (4) keep track of cigarette consumption. These activities are aimed at providing the right situational cues to guide behavior.

Cognitive Supports. Next, the person makes use of three types of cognitive support to assist with the self-management process. Cognitive supports represent psychological (as opposed to environmental) cues. Three such supports can be identified:

1. *Symbolic Coding.* First, people may use **symbolic coding**, whereby they try to associate verbal or visual stimuli with the problem. For example, we may create a picture in our mind of a smoker who is coughing and obviously sick. Thus, every time we think of cigarettes, we would associate it with illness.
2. *Rehearsal.* Second, people may mentally rehearse the solution to the problem. For example, we may imagine how we would behave in a social situation without cigarettes. By doing so, we develop a self-image of how it would be under the desired condition.
3. *Self-Talk.* Finally, people can give themselves “pep talks” to continue their positive behavior. We know from behavioral research that people who take a negative view of things (“I can’t do this”) tend to fail more than people who take a more positive view (“Yes, I can do this”). Thus, through **self-talk**, we can help convince ourselves that the desired outcome is indeed possible.

Behavioral Dilemmas. Obviously, self-management is used almost exclusively to get people to do things that may be unappealing; we need little incentive to do things that are fun. Hence, we use self-management to get individuals to stop procrastinating on a job, attend to a job that may lack challenge, assert themselves, and so forth. These are the “**behavioral dilemmas**” referred to in the model (**Exhibit 4.11**). In short, the challenge is to get people to substitute what have been called low-probability behaviors (e.g., adhering to a schedule or forgoing the immediate gratification from one cigarette) for high-probability behaviors (e.g., procrastinating or contracting lung cancer). In the long run, it is better for the individual—and her career—to shift behaviors, because failure to do so may lead to punishment or worse. As a result, people often use self-management to change their short-term dysfunctional behaviors into long-range beneficial ones. This short-term versus long-term conflict is referred to as a behavioral dilemma.

Self-Reinforcement. Finally, the individual can provide **self-reinforcement**. People can, in effect, pat themselves on the back and recognize that they accomplished what they set out to do. According to Bandura, self-reinforcement requires three conditions if it is to be effective: (1) clear performance standards must be set to establish both the quantity and quality of the targeted behavior, (2) the person must have control over the desired reinforcers, and (3) the reinforcers must be administered only on a conditional basis—that is, failure to meet the performance standard must lead to denial of the reward.²¹ Thus, through a process of working to change one’s environment and taking charge of one’s own behavior, self-management techniques allow individuals to improve their behavior in a way that can help them and those around them.

Reducing Absenteeism through Self-Management

In a recent study, efforts were made to reduce employee absenteeism using some of the techniques found in behavioral self-management. The employees were unionized state government workers with a history of absenteeism. Self-management training was given to these workers. Training was carried out over eight one-hour sessions for each group, along with eight 30-minute one-on-one sessions with each participant.

Included in these sessions were efforts to (1) teach the participants how to describe problem behaviors (e.g., disagreements with coworkers) that led to absences, (2) identify the causes creating and maintaining the behaviors, and (3) develop coping strategies. Participants set both short-term and long-term goals with respect to modifying their behaviors. In addition, they were shown how to record their own absences in reports including their frequency and the reasons for and consequences of them. Finally, participants identified potential reinforcers and punishments that could be self-administered contingent upon goal attainment or failure.

When, after nine months, the study was concluded, results showed that the self-management approach had led to a significant reduction in absences (compared to a control group). The researchers concluded that such an approach has important applications to a wide array of behavioral problems in the workplace.²²

concept check

- Understand Kanfer’s behavioral self-management process.
- What are things you can do to instill self-management techniques for yourself?
- What behavioral self-management techniques can you use as a manager?

18. F. Luthans and R. Davis, “Behavioral Self-Management—The Missing Link in Managerial Effectiveness,” *Organizational Dynamics*, Summer 1979, p. 43; F. Luthans and R. Kreitner, *Organizational Behavior Modification and Beyond: An Operant and Social Learning Approach* (Glenview, Ill.: Scott, Foresman, 1985).

19. F. H. Kanfer and A. P. Goldstein, *Helping People Change: A Textbook of Methods* (New York: Pergamon Press, 1980).

20. C. C. Neck and C. P. Manz, *Mastering Self Leadership* 6th edition, (Pearson, 2013).

21. A. Bandura, “Self-Reinforcement: Theoretical and Methodological Considerations,” *Behaviorism*, Fall 1976, pp. 135–155; Luthans and Kreitner, *Organizational Behavior Modification and Beyond*.

22. G. Latham and C. Fayne, “Self-Management Training for Increasing Job Attendance,” *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 1989, pp. 411–416.

Exhibit 4.10 Kanfer’s Model of Self-Regulation (Attribution: Copyright Rice University, OpenStax, under CC BY-NC-SA 4.0 license)

Exhibit 4.11 A Social Learning Theory Model of Self-Management (Attribution: Copyright Rice University, OpenStax, under CC BY-NC-SA 4.0 license)

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