



# TODAY'S TECHNIQUES

## Improving Employee Performance Through Behavior Management

AN INTERVIEW WITH DOUG SLAVIN, PSYCHOLOGIST, BEHAVIORAL SYSTEMS, INC.

“There is virtually no problem involving people in the business setting that does not involve increasing or decreasing the rate of some behavior.”



Dr. Slavin

*Behavioral Systems, Inc. is an Atlanta-based management consulting firm which helps organizations improve employee performance by using behavioral principles derived from experimental and behavioral psychology. Founded almost five years ago by President Aubrey Daniels and Chairman of the Board Iran Tarkenton, Behavioral Systems is the only company of its kind operating on a national basis.*

*TODAY'S TECHNIQUES (TT) interviewed Dr. Doug Slavin, the psychologist responsible for the Workshop and Training Division. Dr. Slavin attributes Behavioral Systems' success to having helped companies realize an immediate and measurable cost-savings through increasing the productive behavior of their employees.*

**TT:** How does Behavioral Systems improve employee performance?

**DR. SLAVIN:** Before you can affect or change any behavior you have to be able to observe it. You can't

change something you don't see. Attitudes and motivation are internal states. Whether they exist or not, I don't know. All we can know is that a person behaves in a certain way. In terms of work behavior you need some measure of that. That's called the baseline measure. That's where a person is now. It could be how he runs a machine or produces a report or thinks up ideas.

The first task is to pinpoint the behavior that you're interested in. Sometimes that's easy and sometimes that is very difficult. The next thing is to take some measure, some record of it. You can't change anything unless you know where it's at now. The next step is to use two well-established behavioral principles: the concept of feedback and the concept of reinforcement.

Feedback is the information given to the person about their performance as compared to some standard. “Mr. Jones, the standard on this machine is 1000 widgets an hour. Your performance was 820.” That's just a statement of information. The concept of feedback has a powerful effect on behavior. In the absence of feedback behavior deteriorates rapidly.

In many organizations there is very little feedback. People don't have enough information on how they're performing. Most people say they're performing well, when in fact, they aren't. It's not that they're lying. In most instances they really don't know. They either don't know the standard, or they

Compliments of

BEHAVIORAL SYSTEMS, INC.



aren't getting enough systematic feedback.

One of the first major things that any employer could do is to make a clear statement of what people are supposed to do, which means he has to develop some kind of standard. And secondly, give information—feedback—to the person on some rather frequent basis. Of course, the best feedback is instantaneous.

Now once those two steps have been taken—pinpointing behavior and getting a feedback system to the person—the next step is to reinforce the behavior. Reinforcement is any consequence to a behavior that increases the probability that the behavior will occur again. In layman's terms it's reward; it's any pleasurable thing that follows a behavior.

In a work setting one of the most powerful rewards is for the employer or supervisor to socially reinforce the person. "You're really doing a good job. We really appreciate it." "Oh boy, that's great. You've improved today." Now our studies have shown that the amount of that reinforcement is very low in most industries. The way most work settings operate is as long as things are going along at a minimum nothing happens. The boss doesn't say anything, the supervisor doesn't say anything. It's only if things get really bad that they'll jump up and down. If someone is doing exceptionally well, there rarely is any feedback.

Our argument is to change that around—to use a ratio of four positives to every one negative. That is, if the supervisor had to count up the number of times he gave positive feedback and positive reinforcement to people before he could criticize, he would find an incredible change in the rate of people's performance.

*TT: Is it good to give all positive reinforcement or should you find something negative?*

**DR. SLAVIN:** Oh no, you don't have to find anything negative. It's true that punishment is a very effective way of changing behavior; it will produce the most rapid behavioral change. However, there are three things that always result from punishment that make it a less effective system to use in managing people.

You'll get an emotional response, some kind of emotional arousal. You'll get aggression; punishment

always leads to aggression in some form or another. You'll get escape and avoidance behavior. People don't like punishment so they try to get away from it, or they avoid circumstances—you or work—where there is a high level of adversiveness and punishment in the environment. In business terms, that means you'll have a high rate of turnover from people escaping the environment. Or you'll have high rates of absenteeism, which is avoiding the environment for a period of time. Or you'll have people avoiding the supervisor; if he comes in, they go around the corner.

Aggression takes forms like sabotage, theft, unionization, and high rates of negative verbal behavior about the company. "It's a lousy company, unfair," those kinds of negative statements. Those are the consequences of punishment. So if you are going to use it you only want to use it sparingly on behaviors which are really serious and must be stopped, and you want to be well aware of the potential problems.

In work settings there really aren't many punishments. You can dock salaries, lay off employees, criticize, and certainly fire them—the ultimate punishment in that sense. But you should use those only with serious problems like safety behavior and theft.

Now the point I want to emphasize is that we are not talking about expensive kinds of reinforcers—salary increases and so on. We're talking about rather simple social reinforcements, social interaction kinds of things: buying the guy a cup of coffee, smiling at him, giving him positive statements about his work behavior. The point is that these are all contingent on his behavior. If the person does not behave at the level you want, he does not get the reinforcements. This is not a model that says, "Be nice to people, and they will work hard for you." That's not true incidentally. Being nice to people is a nice thing. But an employer should recognize that being nice to people does not affect their work behavior. At most it will get them to come to work because it will be pleasant to be there. But it won't make any change in the rate or level of their performance. However, if you are nice to people contingent on their level of performance, then their performance will change.

*TT: When you go into management how do you operate?*



DR. SLAVIN: We place a consultant in the plant or the office or the organization, and he works directly with the supervisors on a day-to-day basis, teaching them theory and the skills to carry out behavioral change programs. A supervisor might say, "I've got a guy who's got a poor attitude." Now the first step is for that supervisor to say what the employee is doing; what is his behavior that should be changed.

Usually it will boil down to, "He's not performing at a rate which is acceptable or considered standard." That gets us away from all the business of some sort of internal things called "laziness" or "motivation" or "bad attitude." Once you use those concepts you're dead. What else can you do? How do you make a lazy person not lazy or motivate a poorly motivated person if it has something to do with something inside them? You have to end up being a shrink and supervisors are not very good at being shrinks.

So then we start a series of training sessions and on-the-job demonstrations that teach the supervisor to use these skills. Now, why should the supervisor learn them? After all, he has enough to do. Well, he's the one with the problems. He's the one who has the people who ought to perform at a certain level. When the system begins to succeed for him then that is a reinforcement for him to learn more about the system. The process will take six to eight months for the average company. An individual may pick it up in ten minutes or never. It depends a lot on how effectively the procedures work for them.

*TT: Does it take six to eight months for the company to see results from your program?*

DR. SLAVIN: No, there's a relatively rapid impact within the first month. We start with the front-line supervisors because that's where we get the fastest results. If we change the performance of an individual operating at 30% of his capability and bring his performance up to 75% of standard, he's still below standard. But if we do this for ten people on a shift, we can save that particular plant perhaps \$4000 per month on that shift alone. When you cut across all shifts there is an immediate cost-savings to the company. Then we can move up through the system.

*TT: Does management adapt to your techniques easily?*

DR. SLAVIN: Not always. That's why we also have the Workshop and Training Division. It's one thing to teach a supervisor these concepts so that he knows reinforcement increases the rate of a person's

performance; but for the supervisor to go out and tell somebody, "I'm really delighted with your improvement over the last couple of days," is a new behavior for him. He's going to have to learn how to do that. It's a skill. And he may be somewhat uncomfortable. Remember, he's been a supervisor for thirty years, and he's never behaved that way towards people before.

The workshops and seminars are an intensive three or four days of activities that teach management to practice and try out a lot of these new behaviors in order to be socially reinforcing. We teach them some conflict resolution skills too: how to listen to people more carefully and how to solve problems in terms of trying to pinpoint the behaviors involved. Not only in terms of employees, but also with two other groups of people in the work setting that you have to deal with.

One group is your colleagues or peers. You want to make sure the supervisor who runs the shift before you leaves the shift in good condition so your people can come in and start right away. Or you may need certain kinds of behavior from the printing department which always seems to do the wrong things. You have groups or divisions within the company, and you as the manager of a group want colleagues and other groups to behave certain ways.

So you need to learn how these principles apply in those circumstances. The other group, of course, is people higher up the system.

How do you influence or change the behavior of your employer or your boss? We all operate according to the same laws. To what degree can you reinforce him and how? How can you be more assertive with him?

*TT: It seems essentially that by reinforcing good behavior you'll get better behavior. But there must be something more to know. From there on is it just practice?*



DR. SLAVIN: What you need to know is when, how much, and how to pinpoint the behavior. The hardest thing is to pinpoint behavior. For example, suppose a supervisor is responsible for the safety of employees. If I asked him what is the best way to prevent



accidents, he'd probably tell me what he doesn't want. "I don't want people to have accidents." Well, if you don't want people to have accidents, all you need is a plant filled with dead people. Dead people don't have accidents. But if we push the manager to find the behaviors he wants, and back him with our technology and experience, then he can look and say, "There are a set of behaviors I can recognize as safe. Are they wearing earplugs? Do they have on goggles?" Then you can begin to define those behaviors. All you have to do is to go out and walk through a plant and count the number of people with proper, safe behaviors. You would then plot that on a graph and set up a feedback system with social reinforcement for people behaving the way you want.

*TT: When do you reinforce or not reinforce a behavior?*

**DR.SLAVIN:** When a behavior is weak or needs to get started, you would want to reinforce it as immediately as possible and as often as possible, preferably every time it occurs. You don't have to do it all the time; there are schedules in reinforcement. Most of us don't get reinforced every time we behave in a certain manner. Behaviors may be reinforced every 10th time or every 100th time or every 1000th time, and there are complicated schedules of reinforcement. So to know when and how much to reinforce becomes part of the technology.

*TT: Wouldn't that take a lot of time for an individual to learn?*

**DR. SLAVIN:** To some extent. We've simplified things a lot by rules-of-thumb. When a behavior is weak and you want to get it started, you reinforce it as immediately as you can 100% of the time. Once the behavior approaches or reaches the standards that you want, you can begin to fade the reinforcement. Instead of every day it could be every couple of days, and then fade it some more. But what you must remember is to never, *never* stop reinforcing to some degree.

*TT: If I were producing at a high level already, would I still need reinforcement?*

**DR.SLAVIN:** If a person is performing at high levels, and you want to keep him performing at high levels, you have to reinforce him. The error most managers make is that if a person performs well, they ignore

(Continued on page 5)

## 10 WAYS YOU CAN IMPROVE EMPLOYEE PERFORMANCE TODAY

1. Recognize your attention is powerful. Make it contingent upon people's performance...don't give it away.
2. Start the day by thinking of an employee's behavior you want to reinforce. Start by using simple reinforcements—say, "Good morning," smile, or buy the person a cup of coffee as a reward for good performance.
3. Pinpoint the behaviors you want. Count their frequency and post a graph on them for public accountability.
4. Develop a clear statement of what you want by setting up performance standards.
5. Set up a regular system of feedback to individuals about their performance as compared to the standards.
6. Set low goals and increase the level of the goals gradually as they are accomplished.
7. Set reinforcement goals for yourself...use four positive reinforcements for every one negative criticism.
8. NEVER stop reinforcing. In the beginning reinforce behaviors 100%, then fade the reinforcers as the performance improves.
9. Use punishment only when really necessary—on dangerous, unsafe behavior that must be stopped.
10. Ignore the poor performer—make him earn your attention.



him. And behaviors that are ignored will extinguish. Look at the way most people perform in American industry. They perform at the minimum, just enough to prevent them from being fired. But we don't want that. We want them to perform at their highest possible level. The only way you'll get anybody to perform at that level is to have their behavior pay off. If it doesn't, they'll stop doing it. They will return to low levels of performance.

*TT: Do you also try to identify the reasons why a person is not producing?*

**DR. SLAVIN:** Yes. Now you're getting into behavior analysis of the performance. You begin to look at what are the consequences for the person who performs well and what are the consequences for the person who performs poorly. In some instances a poor performer is being reinforced for poor performance. I'll give you a true example.

A man in a textile mill doffed machines—that is he took off spools of thread and stacked them. If he didn't take them off at a certain rate his machine cut off which would also cut off other machines which fed into it. This down-time is very expensive, so it was important that he maintain a certain rate. The plant manager's office overlooked the machine, and he could see the worker slowing down and his machine start to cut off. The plant manager would come out and criticize, "Your machine's down. You gotta get working faster." Because he's the plant manager, he was concerned that the machine was down, so he helped the man by doffing some of the thread.

Now, you don't have to be a terribly sophisticated behavioral person to see the consequence of poor performance in that case. The plant manager gave him a lot of attention. He may be yelling at him, but he's attending to him. And he's helping him with his work. While he's helping him with his work the guy could also complain about his wife

All you have to do is change the contingencies around. Does the guy ever perform well? Of course he does. The machine isn't always down. Sometimes he's caught up quite nicely. What happens? Nothing. That's when the plant manager should go out and say, "Fantastic, you're up to standard. You're performing well. As a matter of fact, let me help you catch up even more. Now you've got ten minutes. Come on, I'll buy you a cup of coffee. Incidentally, how's your wife?"

*TT: Are there other mistakes that management makes?*

**DR. SLAVIN:** The biggest mistake that industry makes is this idea: "Let's set high goals as a challenge." You don't.

All you'll do is build in failure for people. Failure is a negative event. It's punishment or in some instances, it's an extinction procedure—the person will stop behaving. So you set low goals, just high enough for him to reach.

"Look, you're at 20%; we're going to go up to 25% of standard." Teach him. Make sure the guy's got the skill to do it.

When he's at 25% you say, "Fantastic! You've really got it together. You're doing great!" Give him a lot of social reinforcement. Then, "Let's try 30%. Do you think you can go to 30%?" "Yeah, sure, I think I can." What's he got? He's got self-confidence because he says, "I think I can." Of course he thinks he can because he just succeeded at 25%.

*TT: Do you have a program for small businesses that can't afford to have your company come in?*

**DR. SLAVIN:** Yes, we have a program for small businesses. The program is an intensive three-day seminar, introducing and trying out a variety of the things that I have explained. When the person goes back to his company, he can begin to set up some specific plans and pinpoint the behaviors he wants to work on. Then some of my staff and I consult with him, maybe an hour or two a week, to make sure it's going O.K. and to see if he's falling into any pitfalls.

*TT: Are there any techniques, other than reinforcing behavior, that I can use to cause some immediate changes?*

**DR. SLAVIN:** Yes. Identify and count the behaviors you want. Post a graph on them to give people feedback, and tell them they are doing well as they improve. That would be a simple way to do it. If you do that you will see some changes.

*TT: Do I show them the graph?*

**DR. SLAVIN:** Yes, it's public accountability. You do it contingent on the person's behavior, and you do it individually. I'm not talking about a group. That's one of the pitfalls: telling a group of people they've





done well. Groups don't behave; people behave. And there may be somebody in that group who has not behaved well. But he is still getting social reinforcement. So you're training him to be a poor performer.

*TT: Any other tips a manager could use?*


**DR. SLAVIN:** He should recognize that his attention is very powerful, and that he should use it depending on people's performance. Don't give it away.

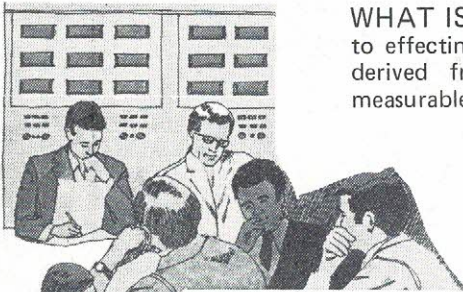
The manager should have a graph in his office for the number of times he's reinforced somebody or commented positively on their behavior. He should set a goal for himself. These principles can be used

to change his own behaviors, too.

*TT: For the manager who wants to start today, what are some techniques he could use?*

**DR. SLAVIN:** He could say, "Good morning," or smile a little or buy somebody a cup of coffee. Sometimes it's easier to do that than to say, "I like the way you're performing." Reinforcement can be accomplished through actions as well as through verbal communications—but it should be contingent upon the person's performance. Ignore the poor performer.

Start the day by taking five minutes to think of some employee's behavior you want to reinforce rather than saying, "I'll do it at the end of the day." Do it now. It's a nice way to start the day. 



**WHAT IS BEHAVIOR MANAGEMENT?** Behavior Management is a new approach to effecting performance improvement. It is a set of systematic principles and procedures derived from behavioral psychology. The emphasis in behavior management is on measurable, observable results.

**WHO CAN USE BEHAVIOR MANAGEMENT?** Behavior Management is for executives, managers, supervisors—everyone who must get tasks done through other people or through layers of people.

**WHY BEHAVIOR MANAGEMENT?** Among all the economic factors, human resources are the most important, yet the least efficiently used. The ultimate success or failure of a business often depends on management's ability to get people to perform. Behavior Management offers great potential for accomplishing significant economic gains by providing the skills to improve human output.

## Behavior Management



**THIS ISSUE OF TODAY'S TECHNIQUES** is an introduction to behavior management principles and procedures. With further training in behavior management you will:

- be skilled in performance measurement and positive reinforcement procedures for behavior shaping.
- have the ability to pinpoint and identify problems from a behavioral point of view.
- have practice in applying behavior management to a self-selected problem.
- be aware of pitfalls to avoid when implementing a behavior management program system-wide.
- be knowledgeable of resources for aid and advice in carrying out a behavior management program.

A BRIEF QUESTIONNAIRE which may ultimately benefit you has been enclosed.

PLEASE TAKE A MOMENT and check off your answers. Your information will help develop even better methods of implementing behavior management.

WE WILL KEEP YOU INFORMED of our findings in future issues of *Today's Techniques*.

**B**ehavioral  
**S**ystems  
**I**nc.

3300 NORTHEAST EXPRESSWAY / ATLANTA, GEORGIA 30341 / (404) 458-8251