

Reinforcement Theory – B F Skinner; 1938 (Process Theory)

What is the Theory?

B.F Skinner's work is built on the assumption that behaviour is influenced by its consequences. Reinforcement theory is the process of shaping behavior by controlling consequences of the behavior.

Reinforcement theory proposes that you can change someone's behaviour by using reinforcement, punishment, and extinction. Rewards are used to reinforce the behaviour you want and punishments are used to prevent the behaviour you do not want. Extinction is a means to stop someone from performing a learned behaviour. The technical term for these processes is called '*operant conditioning*'.

Key Concepts of Reinforcement Theory

The fundamental concepts of this theory are reinforcement, punishment, and extinction.

Reinforcement can be divided into positive reinforcement and negative reinforcement as follows:-

- **Positive reinforcement** occurs when the consequence resulting in the behaviour you are attempting to produce increases the probability that the desired behaviour will continue. If a salesperson performs well, that salesperson may receive a bonus, which reinforces the desire to make sales because of the positive consequence of doing so.
- **Negative reinforcement** occurs when a negative consequence is withheld if the behaviour you desire is demonstrated, which will increase the probability that the behaviour you are seeking will continue. For example, let's say that your company is opening a new office in The Outer Hebrides. No one wants to move there. The company decides to let the top ten salespeople in the office pick if they go to the Outer Hebrides or stay at the old office. You work very hard to be in the top ten so you can avoid the negative consequence of relocating there. You will continue to perform your best to avoid the negative consequence. Negative reinforcement, however, is not the same as punishment. Reinforcement theory suggests that when positive reinforcement for a learned response is withheld, individuals carry on practicing that behaviour for some period of time. However, after a while, if the non-reinforcement continues, the behaviour will decrease in frequency and intensity and will eventually disappear.

Punishment occurs when you impose a negative consequence to reduce an undesirable behaviour. While negative reinforcement involves withholding a negative consequence to encourage a desirable behaviour, punishment is imposing a negative consequence to discourage an unwanted behaviour. For example, getting your wages docked for being late to work is a punishment that is imposed on late workers to discourage workers from being late - an undesirable behaviour. However, punishment is often used as a last resort in an attempt to reshape the employee's behaviour because it can result in bad consequences and create more pressure and stress for the employee.

Extinction is a means to stop someone's learned behaviour. You attempt to extinguish a behaviour by withholding the positive reinforcement that encouraged the behaviour. For example, let's say that you manage a production facility that had a hard time keeping up with orders for the past few months. You used overtime pay as a positive reinforcement to bring workers in on weekends and to delay holidays. Now that you have the orders under control, you stop approving overtime. Workers no longer come in on the weekends to work. Their learned behaviour has been extinguished.

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How to Apply this Theory to the Workplace

As a manager, it is important to select the appropriate type of 'Operant Conditioning' to ensure you get the desired results and to avoid conflict. This will depend on a number of factors including but not limited to - the behaviour you want to encourage/discourage, the organisational culture, your personal management style and the circumstances under which the behaviour is being displayed.

Below are some example scenarios that may help you to influence positive behaviours:

Reinforcement Examples:

- **Positive reinforcement** – This may be used to good effect when there is a workplace change on the horizon (e.g. a new system is being implemented or a new Manager is joining the business.) Fear of the unknown may produce an unwanted behaviour in favour of the change which may be helped by introducing positive reinforcement. In this case, positive reinforcement could be introduced in team meetings/briefings, informal brew chats or individually via one to ones.
- Also useful where behaviour/performance/attitude to work has recently started to improve and you want the individual to sustain the desired behaviour and/or outputs. Positive reinforcement could include a simple thank you & well done chat, a hand-written card, or a small gift (making sure you explain the specific reason/s behind your appreciation) to ensure it can be sustained.
- **Negative reinforcement** - Can be used to encourage employee completion of reports in a timely manner rather than face the consequences of being 'named and shamed' and chased in public for non-completion. Also useful as a tool to ensure that annual leave requests are submitted within x days' notice, on the basis that otherwise their leave will automatically be turned down for example.

Punishment example:

- When an individual repeatedly and consciously chooses to ignore a new procedure that you have implemented (maybe because they disagree with it), despite them being spoken to by you about this informally on several occasions, then sometimes there is no other alternative than to formally discipline that individual as a consequence of their negative behaviour. If this is the case, ensure that you follow your organisations formal policies and procedures.

Extinction examples:

- Overcoming changes to current routine that have resulted in a positive reinforced behaviour can sometimes be helped with the extinction method. For example, you no longer want your employees to promote a free service that you were incentivising staff for doing so as you're oversubscribed – so you stop the incentives to signal that this behaviour is no longer required.
- Another example is where you had an employee deputising for you in your absence and had changed their objectives and adjusted their monthly wage for doing so. Once this temporary role ceases, by sitting down with the individual and reviewing their objectives/wage and managing their expectations moving forward, you will encourage a change to their learned behaviour in favour of a redefined set of behaviours that are mutually acceptable.

Extracts taken from <http://study.com/academy/lesson/reinforcement-theory-in-the-workplace-definition-examples-quiz.html>