

Reinforcing Change

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One of the greatest challenges inherent in any change initiative is ensuring the subsequent retention of new behaviors. Understandably, it is easy fall back into old familiar habits soon after a change has been undertaken. What is not as clear is why, after weeks, or even months, newly established patterns can be knocked off track and old habits resurface.

They say it takes 21 consecutive days to form a new habit. It takes only a moment to break a new habit and revert to the old way of doing things. So what can we do to make sure that the new behaviors stick around long enough to become second nature - long enough to engender the same level of familiarity and comfort that the prior habits did?

Behavior modification is an area of study that has fascinated psychologists for a long time. From the early experiments of Pavlov who trained dogs to respond to the sound of a bell as an indicator of food and B.F. Skinner who motivated rats to complete a maze by rewarding them with corn at the end, to current theories on parenting, the constant factor throughout has been positive reinforcement. When attempting to modify behavior, the one practice that has produced long term results with any degree of consistency (without creating negative side effects) is positive reinforcement of desired behaviors.

This means that an organization must look closely at what behaviors are being supported and rewarded at all levels. A good example of how this works would be a sales organization that mandates a new team selling approach with much fanfare and excitement. The company declares its commitment to team selling and creates teams. They share the rationale for the change, including a strong business case for making the change. Managers take the time to listen and respond to everyone's concerns and they provide the necessary training for the switch. The company even introduces a new team-based bonus to supplement the existing individual performance bonus, which remains in place along with the individual tracking of sales to qualify for annual sales conventions.

Although this organization has done many things right in managing this significant change, their team selling initiative is unlikely to succeed. They have introduced a team bonus to reinforce the behavior they want - but it directly contradicts the individual bonus and sales tracking



mechanisms. While reinforcement of desired behaviors is necessary to create change, faced with conflicting reinforcement people will revert to what is comfortable and familiar.

Apparently it is not enough to provide positive reinforcement of desired behaviors. We must also make sure that we do not also reward behaviors that contradict those we wish to sustain.

Clear, consistent positive reinforcement of desired behaviors is the best way to effect a change in the way people do things. To sustain that change, we have to make sure that positive reinforcement of the new habit continues long after the initial change has been fully implemented. In fact, we must continue to reinforce the new habit until it becomes easier, more familiar and more comfortable than the old way of doing things. Otherwise, at the first difficulty, source of frustration, or indication that no one is watching, many people will slide back into those comfortable old habits.