

Punishment analysis



In this essay we look at several reasons to why the application of punishment; a form of operant conditioning remains ineffective at workplace and how to overcome the difficulty by adapting various alternatives.

Punishment at workplace is often given in a way, which meets the requirements for the effective use of punishment which are described as immediacy, severity and consistency. In spite punishment being used commonly, it frequently fails to get us what we want.

Although punishment may produce fast results in the short run but it may lead to problems in the long run. Punishment is not considered a very effective way of changing behavior which is explained with an example of a supervisor raising the disciplinary problems to his manager in (appendix 2) where he receives a public dressing down and is showered with harsh words. However the problem here is that it decreases the likelihood of behavior. Punishment can play a useful role in suppression of behavior rather than teaching the correct behavior. Taking an example of an employee who is reprimanded for taking unauthorized breaks at work.

His behavior might stop when the manager is visible but the threat of punishment vanishes when the manager is no longer present. The quote “when the cat is away the mice are at play”, relates to punishment is only effective when the threat of punishment is present. If the only reason employees do not engage in horseplay is because the supervisor is there to discipline them but the horseplay is likely to begin as soon the supervisor leaves. When individuals are criticized for attempting to resolve interpersonal conflicts, they may decide to quit talking and the conflict continues to smolder.

One wrong response might be replaced with another wrong response where punishment indicates “ what is wrong but not what is right”. In a workplace punishment may eliminate both good and bad behaviors if both of them are tied together. Trying to help a coworker might be seen as “ getting in the way” and result in punishment where the employee keeps on thinking that his helpfulness was being punished which further build up a negative feeling towards the punishing agent who can be a manager or a supervisor when they behave in highly critical manner and harass their subordinates. When relationship between the punishing agent and the person is strained then it is perceived as a personal attack, which results in hatred. Punishment at times results in aggression and if the use of punishment is strongly reinforced it becomes too frequently used and it also causes frustration because the individuals thinking become fixed on past errors rather than on searching for a correct solution. An example looked here would be when a new employee gives the name of his new department incorrectly in a public meeting he will be so humiliated that he repeats the same mistake again and again as humiliation prevents him from thinking anything else.

Punishment administered for poor performance leads to increased performance but without significant satisfaction. It can be handled poorly or it can be handled well in a workplace but it’s the punishing agents challenge to know when to use this strategy and how to use it correctly. To overcome the difficulty the best strategy applied here is to give a mild punishment, which temporarily suppress the wrong behavior and reinforce to emphasize the correct behavior. It is difficult to asses when and how punishment should be carried, it is claimed that punishment is more effective when it is

administered immediately after an undesirable response but if it is delayed it will be perceived as arbitrary, unfair and unrelated to the undesirable behavior. This can be explained with an example where you want the dog off your throat, you don't threaten to mace him for twenty minutes while he works his way but you mace him there and then.

It's same in a workplace. If there are signs of ineffective behavior, then it needs to be changed the first time it occurs by delivering the bad consequences. This doesn't mean that there won't be any preliminary warnings but carrying that on till too long would make the entire team in that workplace suffers. Though punishment has a role to play in changing behavior it should be used sparingly.

While giving punishment the manager or the in a workplace must ensure that it is not too severe as it will result in causing pain and discomfort but if it is too mild it will be ignored. Looking at an example where a boss does not fire his peon for entering office five minutes late few times a month and if his secretary takes two weeks to hand a letter marked, " Urgent," he doesn't let her off with a " Gee, be more careful, OK?" Sometimes managers in workplace punish their staff keeping revenge in mind and with venting frustration. Punishment should be tied to a specific act and focus on it as well. For managers correcting the behavior, not the person leads to getting better results.

Taking an example of getting anything done in a large organization involves the intelligent management of various pinpointed activities just as much as it does the management of the people doing those activities. And it's a lot

easier to focus on the activities – the Behaviors – being performed than to correct the “ deviant” or “ defiant” personalities of the actors. Looking at another example of punishing the undesirable behavior not the person is not to say “ you have a bad attitude” but rather “ not being at your desk is causing major problems”. The only way to reduce ineffective behavior at workplace in long run is to apply punishment consistently that is “ Be Consistent across person and across time”. Managers in a working area are often inconsistent; they need to be consistent even though consistency is hard to manage.

Punishment must be administered in a way that it informs people of what went wrong and also they must change to do right. Punishment should not be followed with an undeserved reward that is if a person is showered with undeserved rewards he will misbehave again. There are various alternatives to remove an undesirable behavior which are more effective than punishment. Unlike punishment positive and negative reinforcement strengthen behavior making it more probable. Alternative to punishment is combining punishment with a positive reinforcement explained with an example of a forklift operator who works in a large supermarket warehouse which is a highest paid non supervisory job in a firm.

He is prone to show off by involving in unsafe driving habits. Peter’s manager throws him out regularly but still he continues with the unsafe driving. On analyzing the situation from reinforcement perspective his manager found out that his undesirable behavior was followed by laughter from other workers. The next time when he repeated the same mistake he was explained what he was doing wrong and reassigned him the warehouse

duties. He was also praised for his performance when he drove carefully and safely.

Believing with what the operant theorists believe that reward is a more powerful method of shaping behavior than punishment. Reward has the virtue of indicating what behavior is required while punishment only indicates a response an individual should withhold. According to Skinner the society has moved from the systems of control based on use of aversive stimuli to the ones that use reward and the organizations have replaced their aversive autocratic managerial practices with rewarding democratic supervisory styles. Under organizational behavior modification theory, a Skinnerian approach to receiving good performance and removing unwanted behavior in workplace was proposed by Hamner which included certain stages to be followed when introducing positive reinforcement. The steps included an objective for measure of performance, specific and reasonable targets where an employee keeps a check on his actual goals and the manager takes the feedback from the employee. The manager praises his positive aspects which makes the employee more targeted towards his goals.

The advantage here is using positive reinforcement will lead to greater feeling of self control where as punishment does not offer any control. Negative reinforcement encourages desirable behavior by withdrawing the negative consequence when the desired behavior occurs. An example would be supervisor saying “ if you admit it, your penalty would reduce”. Negative reinforcement has a longer lasting effect than punishment and is unlikely to disappear as the employees keep on thinking whether it is still operating or

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not. I certainly feel that punishment alone is difficult to apply in workplace as punishment doesn't work- not well and not for long but it isn't that punishment cant work.

It will only work when applied correctly and with the use of positive reinforcement.