Management Practices Gone Wrong

How to Break Old Patterns Using the Science of Behavior

By Aubrey C. Daniels, Ph.D.

Efficient and effective performance is not something that only lucky leaders can achieve. It is obtainable by everyone who knows and applies the laws of behavior in an effective way. While many managers think they know these laws, few do. Common management systems, processes, and management practices were designed and implemented without a full understanding of what is known about the science of behavior.

The mission of a boss at any level of the organization is to "create successful employees."
– Aubrey Daniels

Unfortunately, many widely used organizational systems, processes, and management practices actually detract from your business outcomes. The way in which they are designed, implemented, and managed determines your success as a leader to achieve better performance and, therefore, better business outcomes.

Just because something doesn't work doesn't mean managers won't continue to use it. So many practices have been institutionalized through the years that it's no wonder managers think nothing of adopting them.

Ranking is one such practice. While it's intended to motivate employees to be the best, it more often devalues the performance of all those who aren't at the top. What managers don't understand is that it creates internal competition rather than cooperation, and it doesn't motivate the ones on the bottom to improve or those at the top to reach higher. Unfortunately, it often creates enmity between those ranked higher and those rated lower. The reality is that for those who aren't at the top, or close to it, this process becomes demotivating as they realize they will never be able to perform better than those above them.

Another common and unintentional practice that managers use is the "you did a good job but" approach when providing feedback or attempting to correct poor performance. When managers intend to reinforce the things employees did right but then end it on a note of what more they can improve, employees forget the good and focus only on what they did wrong. If this is done often, employees hate to hear the good because they know criticism is likely to follow. They also begin to suspect that the only reason you say something good is to set them up for bad news.

A frequent mistake in correcting behavior is to "sandwich" the problem behavior between two compliments. Managers are often taught that saying something positive before mentioning the problem makes the employee more responsive to the negative and by ending with a positive it protects the person's ego. At best, this dilutes the message. At worst, it inadvertently reinforces the problem behavior. It may make the conversation more comfortable for you, but it has a very unreliable impact on the performer. These methods, even if done with the best of intentions, are demotivating and usually result in employees doing only what they are required to do.

Another problem to watch out for is unintentionally rewarding negative behavior. When managers don't understand positive reinforcement as a scientific concept, many problems can crop up as a result of efforts to build a positive culture. For example, the worst advice you could ever give or get is:

Always be positive! While it sounds good and many people strive to eliminate negativism from their relationships, we know that if you are positive at the wrong time, you will get more of the wrong behavior. Behavior you want more of needs positive reinforcement. Behavior that you don't want should not be reinforced.

A question to ask that will help you avoid rewarding negative behavior is, "What does the person want?" If bad behavior gets him what he wants, you can count on the fact that he will do it more often. For example, if "all he wants to do is argue," then arguing with him will only increase argumentative behavior. Positive reinforcement is a powerful interpersonal tool. Use it well and it will result in healthy, productive relationships. Use it poorly and it will make you and those you work with miserable, unhappy, and unproductive.

Careful consideration should also be given to your performance systems. Performance appraisals, for instance, have been tweaked by organizations for more than 50 years and are still the occasion for the most contentious interaction between employee and manager. Tweaking a bad system, while having the potential for making it "less bad," cannot make it good or effective.

While frequency is an issue with the annual review, going from an annual to a quarterly appraisal will not address the frequency issue in any significant way. In fact it just keeps employees in a perpetual state of agitation over the process—they are not over the negative emotion of the last one before it is time to do it again. There should be only one business reason for giving an appraisal and that is to help the employee improve. The mission of a boss at any level of the organization is to "create successful employees." In this sense a performance appraisal of direct reports is a scorecard of the boss' effectiveness, not the employees. The best job people will ever have is one where they know at the end of every day how well they have done.

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The budget process is yet another example of an organizational necessity that requires more than accounting to ensure its effective and efficient use. Let's face it, if there is not some incentive to employees to save or cut, someone will always find a way to spend whatever is available. Here are a few motivational ideas for reducing spending and/or leveraging opportunities to get the most out of your budget:

1. **Provide incentives to employees to eliminate waste and fraud.** Use a gainsharing plan that rewards employees with a portion of the savings.
2. **Give more budget dollars to those who do more with less.** Rather than continuing to raise the budgets of those who exceed their budget every year, allocate more

funding to those managers who produce the greatest impact with the budget that they have.

3. **Reward the people who remain after rightsizing.** Set up performance bonuses for the employees who remain after the organization has been resized. Maintaining the savings after the rightsizing has been completed is a common struggle faced by organizations.

It may be easier in the short-term to operate your business as you have in the past, but doing so might prevent your organization's long-term success. Using the science of behavior, you can pinpoint the behavior you want (behavior that supports your company's mission and values) and then create and implement management systems, processes, and practices that prompt and reinforce those behaviors and the discretionary effort that separates the best companies from the middle of the pack.

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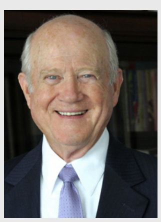
[About the Author]

AUBREY C. DANIELS, PH.D.



Aubrey is a thought leader and expert on management, leadership, safety and workplace issues. For the past 40 years, he has been dedicated to helping people and organizations apply the laws of human behavior to optimize performance. Aubrey is the author of Bringing Out the Best in People, Oops! 13 Management Practices That Waste Time and Money (and what to do instead), Safe by Accident? Leadership Practices that Build a Sustainable Safety Culture and three other business books. When Aubrey is not working on changing the way the world works, he enjoys golf and spending time with his family.

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Regardless of your industry or expertise, one thing remains constant: People power your business. Since 1978 Aubrey Daniels International (ADI) has been dedicated to accelerating the business and safety performance of companies worldwide by using positive, practical approaches grounded in the science of behavior and engineered to ensure long-term sustainability. ADI provides clients with the tools and methodologies to help move people toward positive, results-driven accomplishments. Our clients accelerate strategy execution while fostering employee engagement and positive accountability at all levels of their organization.

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