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“I told you to do it this way.”

“Weren’t you in the training where we learned how to do this correctly?”

“Why do you keep doing this?”

“I thought I was clear about how I wanted this done.”

Anyone who interacts with others has undoubtedly said some variation of the statements above. The frustration that comes from telling someone repeatedly to do something, only to have them not do it or do it wrong, is sometimes palpable and infuriating. There is, however, a logical explanation for why telling people to do things does not always work, and it isn’t usually because the person is inherently bad, lazy, or spiteful. It has to do with what happens to them as a result of not doing it.

1. **People Do Things (or Don’t) Because of What Happens to them Next, Not What Happens Before**—Only things that happen after we’ve engaged in a certain behavior impact whether or not we engage in that behavior again. Here are some examples:
 - a. Sam wears eye protection (behavior) to avoid getting eye injuries on his woodworking job. (outcome)
 - b. Susan submits her expense reports within 30 days (behavior) so she can get reimbursed. (outcome)
 - c. John updates his project manager weekly (behavior) because his project manager thanks him and has told him how helpful this is. (outcome)
2. **People Do Things (or Don’t) Because They’ve Experienced a Positive or Negative Outcome**—If outcomes that follow a behavior are positive or favorable, expect that behavior to continue. If outcomes that follow a behavior are negative or unfavorable, expect that behavior to decrease. Here are some examples:
 - a. Joe’s co-worker Bill is being unsafe, climbing 20 feet without being roped in (behavior). Bill tells Joe it will take him 40 minutes longer to get all the proper gear, he’s never fallen before, and to “stop being such a wuss” while he and the other workers laugh. The outcome of this interaction is negative for Joe. Behavior of peer-to-peer feedback decreases.

- b. Sarah completes a required form accurately and quickly (behavior). Her boss is thrilled and tells her that since her work was so good, she will now be completing all of these forms for the entire team of 12. Sarah views this outcome negatively. Behavior of rapid delivery of quality work decreases.
- c. Kelly steals an idea for a new product line from someone on her team and shares it with leadership, claiming the idea is hers (behavior). Kelly's idea is met with awe and praise and after a successful launch, she is promoted. The outcome for Kelly is positive. Behavior of undermining peers increases.

There are a few other characteristics of outcomes that influence behavior (see PIC/NIC Analysis® in Performance Management), but whether or not an outcome is perceived by the person as positive or negative is by far the most important consideration. Negative outcomes for a person typically include things that require increased effort or time, criticism from others, or time spent away from something preferred. Positive outcomes for a person typically include things that result in less effort, less time, and/or more of something preferred (money, free time, etc.).

So, when wondering why someone is not doing what you've told them to, ask yourself if what you're requesting produces a positive or negative outcome for them. The science of behavior tells us that people behave in a logical and predictable way. If they're not doing something you're requesting, it is only because doing it a different way (or not at all) produces a more positive outcome. Figure out how to fix that, and you'll save your breath and sanity—trying to get people to do something by simply telling them.

Atlanta-based Aubrey Daniels International (ADI) is a pioneering behavioral consulting firm with more than 40 years of success applying the science of behavior to help organizations achieve meaningful improvements.

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ORGANIZATIONAL SYSTEMS

Employees often work within organizational systems that inadvertently encourage unwanted behavior and discourage desired behavior. By analyzing the impact of organizational systems and processes on behavior, ADI works with clients to identify and remove barriers to effective behavior.



LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT

ADI prepares leaders to proactively focus and motivate performance and develop employees in ways that are consistent with the organization's core values and business objectives.



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SCIENCE OF BEHAVIOR

A scientific understanding of behavior enables leaders to see the business case for more positive management strategies. ADI uses science-based strategies to help organizations drive higher rates of the desired behavior and create cultures that attract and retain high-performing employees.

