



Relationship Development and Positive Reinforcement: What's the Difference?

By Bryan Shelton

Relationship development and positive reinforcement are two important (and related) skills for any leader. A good working relationship with your direct reports not only creates a more positive work environment, it also makes the consequences you use more effective. Think about how much more meaningful the praise is when it comes from someone

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with whom you have a good relationship as opposed to when it comes from someone you don't like. Building strong relationships at work will make it easier to discover the things that are most reinforcing to your employees. These reasons alone make investing in relationship building an important part of leading others. However, leaders often confuse relationship-building statements with delivering positive reinforcement; thinking that all positive statements or actions are positive reinforcers. To bring out the best in others and increase discretionary effort, it is important for leaders to build skills in both relationship development and positive reinforcement.

RELATIONSHIP DEVELOPMENT

Taking the time to build and maintain good relationships with others shows them that you care. Connect with people on a personal level by remembering important dates (such as birthdays), important activities (a recent vacation), and by asking about things such as hobbies, friends, family, feelings, thoughts, needs, and their work. Nice gestures such as

bringing in breakfast, handing out company swag, or hosting a quarterly picnic, can also contribute to strengthening relationships. Finally, trust is a key component of good relationships. Trust is built by consistently doing what you say you will do.

When you take the time to foster good relationships you strengthen your ability to use positive reinforcement in meaningful ways. If you are liked, people care about what you think. So your praise, attention, and positive comments will be more effective. Relationships not only strengthen the value of your consequences, they increase reciprocity-type behaviors—in other words, the performer feels good about doing something for you.

POSITIVE REINFORCEMENT

Consequences follow and influence behavior, making it more or less likely to occur in the future. Positive reinforcement is a consequence that increases the likelihood that the behavior will occur again in the future. Positive reinforcement improves performance and creates discretionary effort. When people think of positive reinforcement, they often think of tangible items such as gift cards, ball caps, and money. But the most effective reinforcement is social—interactions between people. Statements of praise, asking questions, desirable assignments, useful conversations, and showing interest in what others have done are all examples of potential positive social reinforcers. This is why managers who have good relationships are more effective at positive reinforcement—social reinforcement is most effective in the context of good relationships.

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Relationship Development	Positive Reinforcement
Congrats on your son winning the baseball tournament.	Thank you for completing this project before the due date.
Happy birthday! I am glad you are part of my team.	I am so glad you consistently double-check this work; it really helps with quality.
Do you need any help on this assignment?	How did you achieve those results so quickly?
I think this project is going to strengthen your facilitation skills which will help if you want to get into management in the future.	Tell me how you got such a great customer reaction?

Above are examples of statements and questions that can be used to develop relationships and positively reinforce your employees. Note that relationship development is broader while positive reinforcement is specific to behaviors you want to see more of.

It's important to understand the difference between relationship development and delivering positive reinforcement in order to be sure you are doing both. Good relationships alone won't strengthen the critical business behaviors required for achieving results. Build the relationships and use targeted, positive reinforcement. The following three dimensions will help guide you.



CONTINGENCY: Positive reinforcement should be contingent on the desired behavior(s). Contingent means delivered only when the desired behavior has occurred. Relationship development statements, on the

other hand, are not contingent on any particular behavior. They occur based on the passage of time, can be prompted by something non-business related, or happen in the course of a conversation.

TIMING: Timing is critical for effective positive reinforcement. Positive reinforcement should be provided during or immediately after the behavior has occurred. The longer the delay between the behavior and delivery of reinforcement, the less effective it will be. Relationship development statements are not usually time dependent—they can occur at any time.

FREQUENCY: The more frequently you provide reinforcement the faster the desired behavior will improve. Most people use far too little reinforcement to have an impact. Relationship development statements have no relation to strengthening a particular behavior and therefore frequency isn't as critical.

Developing strong relationships with employees and using targeted positive reinforcement will create productive working relationships and strengthen the critical behaviors you need to drive business results. Distinguishing between the two will help to ensure that the positive reinforcement you deliver has the impact you desire.

[About the Author]

BRYAN SHELTON



Bryan applies his knowledge and expertise in strategic planning to help organizations align employee performance with company goals. Bryan helps clients create improvement across a variety of business metrics including company growth, profitability, customer service, vision alignment, leadership development, and culture change. He also helps clients implement process improvement initiatives, improve sales results and using performance-pay systems to help drive company results. His behavior-based approaches and applications have supported clients' improvement initiatives, leadership development, and the design and implementation of performance pay systems.

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