



# The Science of Success: Creating Great Places to Work

By Darnell Lattal, Ph.D.

**W**hen economic instability, changing conditions of the workplace, and uncertainty reign, some companies are able to create conditions that promote loyalty, dedication and on-target performance. While we all want our companies to be good places to work, it appears that there may be a financial reason for achieving that goal as well. Against all odds and during the worst of years, **American companies that were rated as *great places to work* consistently outperformed the S&P 500 with stellar results and a committed workforce.**

**Behavior Analysis, one of the first sciences of learning, studies and describes basic principles for producing sustained changes in patterns of behavior.**

– Darnell Lattal

Recent data in 2012 indicate that companies judged to be the best places to work outperformed the market during the 1990s when the markets soared, but they also outperformed the markets during very difficult years. The 31 Best Companies whose shares are publicly traded were compared to the Toronto Stock Exchange's S&P/TSX Composite Index. The best companies outperformed their competitors over a period of five years. **The excess annual total shareholder return was 14.4% above the industry average. Their sales also grew faster than non-best companies to work for at the rate of 14% over 9%.** Some financial analysts in the United States have suggested that tying one's portfolio to such companies may be a very smart move indeed.



After all, not only managers, executives, and business owners want a return on their investment; employees also weigh their personal input against what they are receiving in return. A below market-level salary can be demotivating, but other factors push pay scale farther down the job-satisfaction list. Research by Mercer consulting confirms that factors most influential to employee motivation and engagement are respect, work/life balance, type of work, and quality of leadership and coworkers. In fact, in the United States, pay ranks below all of those items.

This year, Google topped the list of the *Fortune* 500's best companies, its third time as number one. Although the organization has wonderful perks, its employees speak just as much about the culture and the mission. Apparently, it's a win-win: revenue, profits, share price, paid search clicks, and hiring were all up last year. And, as Pete Foley, a North American research leader points out, turnover and hiring is expensive. So why not appreciate and retain the talent you already have on board?

People develop trust when they are treated as valued team members. A critical element in gaining that trust is open communication. John Mackey, of Whole Foods Market, another top 100 company on the *Forbes'* listing, told the audience at the 2012 Great

There are detailed measures of what makes companies great places as ranked by their employees. A 2011 report by the Great Place to Work Institute found that firms who rank highest on the great employer's list share three common elements: employee trust in management, pride in the company, and camaraderie with colleagues. Of course, those companies listed as the top 100 cover a diverse range of industries, so how do they tap into such seemingly ambiguous elements of employee satisfaction? After 25 years of research and data from millions of employees, the Great Place to Work Institute distilled the common factor among all great workplaces—trust.

According to the Institute's findings, trust is gained through "identifying and reinforcing the policies, practices, and behaviors that strengthen the employee-manager relationship." This can only be accomplished through a culture based on credibility, respect, and fairness.

**If everyone is moving forward together, then success takes care of itself.**  
— Henry Ford



Place to Work Conference that honesty from management isn't enough—transparency and walking the talk is key. Jeffrey Katzenberg, of **Dreamworks Animation**, revealed that he shared detailed, even sensitive information about the company's operations, with all employees via a daily internal blog. Other top-rated companies cite developing employee talents, creating a sense of shared goals, and developing a commitment to the community, all encompassed by the common themes of purpose, authenticity, and trust.

We at Aubrey Daniels International (ADI) know that positive reinforcement exists in such settings. We also know that our knowledge of behavior is influential only if we apply it daily in the way we treat one another while we strive to accelerate desired performance. Many programs, processes, and methods are available for addressing workplace problems. ADI uses a range of organizational tools, but at the heart of our methodology is the science of behavior analysis, an approach we have used successfully for more than 30 years. Why do we believe that behavior-based techniques are not only useful but also preferable over other models for performance improvement? Why do companies find it effective? From many of our clients over the years, we hear that our practical, clear, and direct methods are easy to implement and even easier to measure. Many state that the use of positive reinforcement in training and

coaching others how to shape and sustain behavior are the essential elements that make ADI's process unique.

Many best-places-to-work companies state that having fun is a purposeful part of the workplace and, done correctly, fun is always an asset. Tom Follard, president and CEO of **CarMax**, another company on Forbes' A-list, asks, "If you can't have a good laugh with your boss, how can you ever expect to create a great workplace?" However, executives and managers must be careful that fun really is fun. In a recent, *Undercover Boss* episode—a television program where executives work undercover alongside their employees—the CEO of **Oriental Trading Company** learned some eye-opening details. "Rather than feeling compelled to attend an expensive company-wide annual picnic, couldn't the company install some fans in the sweltering warehouses?" one worker asked. The organization had actually taken away a previous perk of cold energy drinks as a cost-cutting measure. The message sent was that management had a huge disconnect with the daily needs of its workers.

Imbedded in the philosophical underpinnings of behavioral science is the concept that **human potential is almost unlimited and**



at the heart of the approach resides dignity and respect for the individual.

Behavioral methods allow us to clarify the obscure, to discover the perceived (as in the Undercover Boss scenario above) and to define complex interactions in ways that make them understandable, effective, and replicable. The evidence is that behavior analysis is extremely well suited to analyzing human performance and establishing predictable, useful, and sustained results in a number of performance settings. The best predictor of future behavior is past behavior. Once we discover the conditions that support desirable behaviors in one setting, we can repeat those conditions across many settings.



Since behavior is predictable based on the reinforcement available to it, we can indeed predict and establish conditions to support long-term performance patterns, whether with front-line employees, customers, industry leaders, vendors, or any other population group inside or outside of business. That said, people must keep in mind that when speaking of conditions, behaviorists are also including intangibles in the environment that reinforce trust and the feelings of dignity and respect. Common questions that arise about the effec-

tiveness of using a behavior-based approach include:

- Can one really predict behavior with any degree of certainty?
- Are these behavior-based methods practical?
- Are these methods complex enough to fully address the human condition?
- Do behavior-based methods achieve sustainable results?
- Can future outcomes be predicted based on the performance of individuals in unique and/or different settings?
- Is positive recognition/reinforcement the right tool for attaining and sustaining optimal performance in a variety of conditions and environments?

The answer to each question above is yes. Following is a brief explanation of behavior analysis and why we are convinced of its centrality in establishing leader behavior and employee commitment that define a great place to work.

## WHAT ARE BEHAVIOR-BASED SOLUTIONS?

Behavior Analysis, one of the first sciences of learning, studies and describes basic principles for producing sustained changes in patterns of behavior. Behavior analytic methods have been successfully applied to a wide range of human populations and issues related to the human condition (dignity, values-based decision making, respect, creativity, innovation, problem solving, language and its meaning), and across a variety of social environments. **This technology, while focused on defining individual and group success variables, also looks at the surrounding conditions that promote or impede rapid change in performance.**

In organizations, the context that supports behavior change is imbedded in the organiza-



tional infrastructure, systems, processes, and policies. Applied behavior analysts discover what organizational cultural and organizational infrastructures say about the values of the organization in regard to the people who work there and then suggest ways that those structures can be arranged to promote rapid positive change in performance.

The conditions of the workplace’s direction, policies, rules of conduct, tolerance for diversity of thought or practice, **core values** as reinforced in actual practice—are all conditions that can accelerate or impede performance. Such things as the performance appraisal, compensation, management and leadership agendas, communication and direction (stated or implied) all impact performance and say more about what is valued than plaques on walls, values statements or slogans. When behavior occurs, the behavioral approach is to look at what happens after the behavior occurs. Is the behavior repeated? Does it stop? The effects of consequences occur multiple times daily and the effect on the workplace is felt whether or not anyone is watching. Those effects create consistency or chaos, predictable or unpredictable performance. Behavior analytic tools show people how to provide systemic and consistent reinforcement for desired patterns of behavior and how to stabilize conditions not only for organizational success but also for individual success. At least five

elements contribute to the effectiveness of behavior analysis in improving human performance. Behavior analysis:

1. **Provides precise definition of conditions surrounding successful performance.** Behavior analysts precisely identify and describe (pinpoint) the target behavior and the conditions that support or impede behavior change. In the absence of such precise descriptions of behavior and its controlling conditions, it would be impossible to determine whether a behavior change strategy works and thus impossible to replicate effective strategy. Such lack of replication creates “best guesses” and assumption-driven explanations about why desired behavior occurs in one setting but not in another. Such explanations are not governed by science and usually produce variance that reduces or stops rapid and sustained performance across settings and time. An employee’s state of mind, feeling, and personal belief are private events that can be known as described by the individual. We are interested in how those things show up in the words used and the actions taken and our tools look to the visible demonstration of what can be called feeling or beliefs as the target for change. In both respecting and understanding the limits of a science of behavior, we do not target changing the private world of the individual but rather the public one that can be seen in the workplace. Such internal, private events are indeed valuable targets for self-change, and often the individual will attribute changes in feelings and beliefs as external events and behaviors change. Both elements of the human condition are important. We do not have the tools to get inside the brain but we do deal with all the subtleties of the human condition as it affects words and actions.

When working with leaders or others on their own self-directed change, our lens ultimately is on the things that they do that can be observed by others. One measure of successful coaching can be reported increase in comfort by the performer. Our tools allow us to demonstrate the impact of that reported comfort through the direct observation of others when they see actions that represent increased comfort such as the leader doing more effective speaking, directing and supporting of others. Behavior analysis provides a process for quickly demonstrating effect and then, through repeated trials, demonstrating the extension of those effects across multiple settings. Behavior analysis predicts based on the strength and pattern of observed behavior, not through assumptions about possible occurrences. The result is an intervention that allows for broad applications beyond the specific areas identified for change.

2. **Provides a method of data collection that is repeatable and understandable across observers.** Behavior analysis allows for applications in all settings in which human performance occurs. This technology of trained observation, recording, and then changing environmental conditions accordingly allows us to obtain consistent and replicable performance and results. Any relationship between performance/results and behavior/consequences must be provable, predictable and practical. In a similar vein, the dynamics of the relationship must be usable, meaning that they must be understandable and of use to the widest possible audience if we are to learn how best to bring out the best in others. The process must be knowable and repeatable. Because it addresses behavior, this type of analysis provides an easy-to-

use problem-solving method for a limitless range of endeavors.

3. **Focuses on the behavior of the individual in the particular settings in which that individual performs.** Performance change efforts and assessments are not based on the effects of the intervention on the average client or what might happen based on pooled averages such as population statistics offered in some disciplines. Knowing what the average performer might do does not allow for individual differences and does not allow the same kind of customization of interventions. It does not allow for the assessment of those interventions relative to the unique aspects of individuals. Conversely, a behavioral assessment takes into account an individual's history within a particular setting and examines past patterns of behavior that have been encouraged or discouraged over time. In the behavioral model, data are collected so that rules of conduct and necessary conditions for performance success can be designed with high degrees of prediction and control. Such a design is especially essential for sustaining behavior under conditions of high stress or low levels of overtly reinforcing work. Every intervention can be tailored to a particular client's specific circumstances and needs. We look at a wide range of topics, including influencing customer buying patterns, handling specific pressure depths when probing on oil platforms, retaining clients, reducing the length of power outages, serving hot meals in a timely

**Think twice before you speak, because your words and influence will plant the seed of either success or failure in the mind of another.**

— Napoleon Hill

and polite manner, sustaining high rates of individual effort and impact over time, and so on. Change in each individual must be assessed relative to each individual's starting point but it need not be overwhelmingly time consuming. Almost always baseline performance measures already exist in some fashion or can be obtained quickly.

4. **Identifies the systemic causes of behavior.** Behavior analysis focuses on the cause of the performance. It investigates the systems, processes and behaviors that produce a problem or that will correct it. When conclusions have been drawn, behavior analysts test those conclusions in the natural setting. Only when there is clear evidence that their conclusions are correct do they expand or generalize a procedure. As the procedure is expanded, the analyst carefully monitors the variables to insure that the procedure is robust, meaning that uncontrolled factors are not likely to alter the success of the intervention. Behavior analysts also consider the reinforcing characteristics of others in ensuring the success of the performer. The whole setting as well as the impact of those who interact with one another around key behaviors is important. Once an intervention is successful, the behavioral specialist can help integrate new conditions into the culture. Long-term success depends on finding the key drivers or relations among conditions for that culture, then designing processes to sustain new practices.
5. **Addresses the whole of the human condition.** Whether a person is diligent, persistent, or ethical is defined by actions—words spoken, observable patterns of behavior and, for the individual, events that reinforce and support the repetition of those actions and make the label fit. Therefore, although we require discipline in the appli-

cation of our tools, and we use words carefully to ensure that we are talking about the same things in ways we can observe and record, nothing about the human condition is excluded from what we do. **Because these tools are the most powerful we know to produce rapid change, behavior analysts have a unique responsibility to address change only where needed and to do so in a way that respects and protects the individual performer.** We talk frequently about the critical few behaviors that individuals need to change, but we should talk even more about our belief in the rights of those individuals to be free from others defining the keys to their success for them. **We stand by our commitment to share our strategies and intent with all involved so that we are never doing something to individuals but, rather, we are working openly and honestly with them.** Often behavior is maintained that is harmful or nonproductive or wasteful because those who would address those actions do not understand how people learn. Consequently, the dignity of the human being, the whole person, is neglected badly by uninformed and even superstitious



strategies. Sometimes harmful behaviors are maintained because they are of benefit to someone else. Again, dignity is lost and bad purposes are served.

The work of behavioral specialists is most challenging when addressing all the conditions of experience—when it is applied to the messy and/or subtle uses of words that communicate meaning surrounding action, to areas such as decisionmaking and integrity, to strategic thinking, to personal commitment and how that is defined and demonstrated, to creativity, to leaving a legacy, to standing firm, to the ethical dilemmas faced by executives and others when making choices, and so on. Issues of choice, of emotional intelligence, of self-control and self-understanding are all the purview of behavior analysis. These tools provide a method for arranging conditions of the workplace to bring out the best in the individual—from the senior leadership team to the shop floor. Those conditions

**Strive not to be a success, but rather to be of value.**

— Albert Einstein

do not always have to involve individual behavior, thus allowing each person freedom of expression, as we commonly understand it. Instead, changing certain conditions sets up the right directions, the right tools, the right training, the right measures and motivation to make every performer successful. These are the workplaces where people know what to do without excessive oversight. They report a feeling of freedom of control over their own behavior, a sense of dignity, and the fulfillment of well-directed recognition.

### NEW DIRECTIONS IN APPLYING THE SCIENCE TO THE WORKPLACE

ADI's approach has shifted from focusing on employees at the front lines and how their supervisors can recognize and reward their



activities to a broader analysis of the environment of the organization and the role of the individuals within the environment. In our Western culture, the concept of our uniqueness as individuals is dominant and important to almost all of us.

Few of us view our actions as part of a larger pattern that is dependent upon the actions of others, a concept more in line with Eastern philosophies than our keenly reinforced sense of individualism. Many of us are not eager to admit that our actions can be impacted by external variables or by events that take place outside of ourselves. We may not want to acknowledge that what we do may be subject to those who control our contingencies for reward or that our actions may be strongly influenced by a unique history of reinforcement that was imposed upon us. Most of us assert responsibility for our own actions. The core we attribute to being a free being is philosophically and religiously grounded for many of us.

Behavior analysis is a science of learning, not a religion, but it has a philosophical undercurrent. We do, in philosophical terms,





have the power to influence others for good or not so good purposes. We are influenced by others as well. The human experience is an extraordinarily connected one across cultures and conditions by the same laws of learning. While we are each unique, we are part of the larger human community and we continue every day to add to that community

through our actions and reactions. Being alert to that, understanding our capacity to change the human condition for the better through simple acts every day is key to building great places to work. As specialists in behavioral applications, we understand the multiple influences that operate—internally and externally—on each of us as human beings. Each of us, whether we call it legacy or the daily patterns of our interactions, contribute to that behavioral stream of influence. From the behavior analysts’ side, we need to communicate the wonderfully pragmatic tools of the science while emphasizing the importance of individual human dignity. We are certain that if more organizations look at their human capital with the unique perspective we bring, they can earn the status and rewards of being “a **great place to work**” and gain the benefits of accelerating performance, even in down markets. We have the tools to make it happen.



## [About the Author]

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For more than 30 years, Darnell has been dedicated to supporting clients in areas such as strategy implementation, behavioral systems re-design, and leadership development. Her expertise lies in coaching individuals and organizations towards effective behavior change and is currently working to help advance the mission of The Aubrey Daniels Institute. Darnell's greatest joy is in furthering the incredible power for bringing out the best that behavior analysis provides to others, including to her seven grandchildren.

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## [About ADI]

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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