

Managing Safety: Can Punishment Improve Safety?

The dialogue in today's safety world is filled with praise for terms like empowerment, ownership and involvement, with criticism for terms such as blame and punishment. So should safety focus solely on positive reinforcement and completely eliminate negative consequences? The answer is a resounding "no," but with some much needed guidelines.

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Punishment is designed to stop, not start, behaviors. Almost every week, I hear someone planning to get an employee to do something they currently are not doing by using punishment. Punishment is not a tool to start anything except avoidance behaviors and malicious compliance. There appears to be an assumption that if you stop a certain undesirable behavior, the desired behavior automatically will take its place. That usually is not the case. Stopping and starting behaviors require different tools, and there is seldom a one-size-fits-all solution.

Guideline No. 1: Only use punishment to stop undesirable behavior. Using punishment as a tool to stop behaviors can be effective or ineffective, depending on the timing and certainty of its use. If you use punishment too long after the undesirable behavior or use it inconsistently, it may not have the desired effect. I often hear the phrase, "We should punish this one to send a message that we are serious about safety." The way to demonstrate that you are serious about safety is to be timely and consistent, both with reinforcement and punishment. Untimely and inconsistent use automatically sends the message that safety management is sloppy and inefficient, or simply out of touch with workplace realities.

Guideline No. 2: Carefully separate the mandatory part of safety from the discretionary part of safety. Workers should know that certain safety rules and procedures are a condition of employment and that violations will not and cannot be tolerated. Regulatory agencies demand compliance with certain guidelines and organizations can't refuse or resist without stiff penalties.

Other parts of safety may be done at the discretion of the workers. Participation in voluntary programs or following suggested guidelines should be encouraged, but failure to do so should not be punished. Using punishment to get workers to be compliant should be the norm. Using punishment to get workers to go above and beyond simply does not work and usually is counterproductive. Think of punishment as a tool of basic safety and not to be used for safety excellence initiatives.

Guideline No. 3

Guideline No. 3: Consider three words to guide the use of punishment for safety: willful, flagrant and repeated.

Willful – Workers who are trying to do their jobs and are serious about safety still make inadvertent mistakes. Punishing these mistakes is tantamount to punishing the good intentions and efforts to be safe as well. Honest mistakes should result in coaching, not punishment. On the other hand, if a worker makes a

conscious choice to violate a rule or override a safety device, punishment might be the right tool to stop that behavior. It is not always easy to determine if the act was willful or simply an oversight or lapse, but it always is important to try to do so. Often, the attitude and past performance of the employee is a good indicator of the willingness to violate safety rules.

Flagrant – In the case of flagrant violations, it is not difficult to determine if the act was willful. Flagrant violations include those done immediately after being instructed to do otherwise, as a way to demonstrate defiance to supervisors or coworkers. The indicators of such behaviors often continue in the aftermath when the involved person persists in resisting both cooperation and instruction. Workers who openly defy authority and guidelines for safety are the prime candidates for punishment and supervisors carefully should document the situations and prescribed consequences. This documentation and communication should be aimed at sending the message that a repeat offense will result in even more severe penalties and will not be overlooked or tolerated.

Repeated – Repeat offenders often fall into the willful or flagrant categories as well. But even if they don't, they still may be candidates for punishment. Organizations should not tolerate repeat offenses in safety, both for the sake of the worker and the organization. Even innocent mistakes, if repeated often enough, can turn into personal and organizational disasters. Workers who simply cannot master doing the job safely, and organizations that allow them to be unsafe, expose themselves to great risks that are not good sense or good business. Punishment may be the right tool to stop the risks and protect the parties involved. Remember that punishment can be administered with concern as well as with strictness and warning. I always remember one manager who told his worker, "I would rather help you find a new job than help your family find a new father."

Guideline No. 4

Guideline No. 4: Always try to find the influence. We are realizing today, more than ever, that people do things for a reason. If we don't change the reason, we may not change the behavior.

When considering punishment as an option, it especially is important to determine if the influence on the behavior in question was a personal or organizational one. Personal influences can include perceptions of risks, uncertainty of how to complete a job safely due to lack of training or simple habits of risk-taking that have formed over time. Punishment potentially can cause the worker to make changes in factors over which he or she has the power to control. Organizational influences, such as workplace or workflow design or availability or condition of tools and/or equipment, often are beyond the control of the individual. Punishment is inappropriate and ineffective if the primary influence was beyond the control of the individual worker.

Just as punishment should not be completely ruled out as an option in safety management, it also should not automatically be used. Each situation potentially is different and should be thoroughly diagnosed before prescribing a solution. Punishment, even when effective, can have negative side effects on relationships. Weighing the importance of the relationship to the importance of the behavioral change should be the final consideration in the decision to use punishment to improve safety.



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