



FREE Newsletters From IndustryWeek

Top quality editorial content motivates manufacturing executives to subscribe to IndustryWeek's e-newsletters. Each newsletter has a different editorial focus and mission, and is written specifically to meet your particular information needs. See the newsletters available at

<http://www.industryweek.com/newsletters.aspx>

[Home](#) : [Operations](#) : Managing People with Animal Science

Managing People with Animal Science

Traditional management tools may work for simple, repetitive tasks, but beware their impact on creative work.

Thursday, July 12, 2012

By There is no denying that we have learned a lot about performance management from B.F. Skinner. His experiments, and the work of those who followed him, gave us an insight into how to change behavior. We started to think of behavior as having a reason or influence, and we began to understand how certain environmental and organizational factors could either encourage (reinforce) that behavior or discourage (punish) it. This thinking has impacted everything from corporate communications and organizational design to motivational strategies, such as rewards and incentives. The only initial criticism of Skinner was that many of his experiments were conducted on animals rather than humans.

New research has not so much refuted Skinner as it has begun to modify his findings. Interestingly, the first real challenges came from more philosophical sources. Without denying that Skinnerian methods work, people like Alfie Kohn questioned whether it was wise to use them to reward workers for actions we were already paying them for. There were other attacks on the grounds that using carrots and sticks was a form of manipulation and less than honest as a management strategy. Neither of these two schools of thought made a serious impact on the use of these techniques, however.

The next set of research that caught attention originated in economic circles. Although it did not even allude to behaviorism or Skinner's work directly, it did refer to something vaguely called "common wisdom," which can be interpreted as such. These experiments focused on how common rewards and incentives impact human performance. They found that, if the task being targeted was a simple matter of routine action, typical rewards and punishment worked as expected. However, if the task required even basic cognitive effort, the rewards often had an inverse effect. These findings are explored more fully in Dan Pink's book, "Drive."

So what does this mean for us, the managers and leaders of organizations? It means that we must

re-examine our thinking about the role of human beings in our organizations and determine if we can effectively manage them with the animal science we have been using. If we are still using humans as cogs in a machine, as we were taught to do by Frederick W. Taylor during the Progressive Era, the answer may still be “Yes.” However, if we want our cogs to think, the answer is a resounding “No!”

The dichotomy may be a simple one: when we want people to perform simple (animal-like) tasks which require only compliance behaviors, we can use the traditional management tools including rewards and incentives. However, if we want people to do creative or organizational thinking to direct their tasks, we need to re-examine how to best make this happen. It is important to remember that the new discoveries don't just suggest that traditional rewards don't increase cognitive tasks, they actually diminish them. This is not a simple matter of being ineffective. These approaches are highly detrimental!

Motivating Creative Work

There are two schools of thought on new techniques to manage and motivate workers in cognitive tasks. The first is detailed in Pink's book and can be easily remembered with an acronym I borrowed from my days with electricity: AMP.

A = autonomy. Workers who think for a living like to do so independently, or at least with minimal micro-management. In experiments where creative thinking was the goal, giving workers freedom to be creative worked very well.

M = mastery. Thinkers like to get better at things; doing so is very motivational to them. So giving workers opportunities to further their knowledge and/or master their skills will not only make them better prepared, but more motivated.

P = purpose. Thinkers like to use their talents to achieve something worth accomplishing. Including them in the rationale for what they are doing, or allowing them to apply what they know to other worthwhile purposes, motivates them to excel.

This formula is used in software companies to encourage development of new products and “fixes” for old products, with great effect. It is also becoming part of the mantra of other organizational management strategies in the form of terms such as “intrapreneurism” and “decision rights.” Giving creative thinkers freedom, increased abilities and meaning can replace the whole scheme of carrots and sticks. It is even a good replacement for profit sharing or pay-for-performance schemes, in some instances.

However, there is nuance to the AMP model that cannot be forgotten. Workers in such a scheme must make enough salary to comfortably meet their needs, or it doesn't work. Money is an effective motivator if you don't have enough and truly need more. If you take the “need” element off the table, money loses most of its power to motivate and the AMP model works well if effectively applied. Remember, this should only be used with cognitive tasks or jobs, not routine ones.

The Value of Visible Improvement

Another model worth considering came from a study of motivation conducted at Harvard. In this study, workers doing jobs requiring cognitive functions reported being most motivated when they could see visible progress towards well-defined goals. Could it be that simply setting improvement

goals, achieving them and keeping score can be a motivational management strategy? In certain instances, it seems to be true. However, the visibility of such improvement is critical to success and often requires new or creative communication media.

The most basic questioning of Skinner's methods, when applied to people, involves the debate over the importance of the nature of motivation. Is it okay to get people to do what you want any way that works, or is it important that people do the right thing for the right reason? Many argue that people are intrinsically motivated and many work environments "beat" the motivation out of them after they arrive to work. Management strategies that feed the internal motivation, rather than replacing it with bribes or trinkets, can have that advantage.

The bottom line is that people differ from animals in their ability to think and create. If those qualities are critical to your bottom line, you may want to revisit your management and motivational strategies and take advantage of the latest technologies to maximize human performance.

Terry L. Mathis, founder and CEO of ProAct Safety, was listed as one of 'The 50 People Who Most Influenced EHS' for the 2nd consecutive year by EHS Today. As an international expert and safety culture practitioner, he has worked with hundreds of organizations customizing innovative approaches to achieve and sustain safety culture excellence. He has spoken at numerous company and industry conferences, and is a regular presenter at NSC, ASSE PDC, and ASSE SeminarFest. He can be reached at info@proactsafety.com.

©2010 IndustryWeek. All Rights Reserved.

This copy is for your personal, non-commercial use only. To order distribution-ready copies or to electronically reproduce this material on your site, contact the IndustryWeek Reprints Department at 1-877-652-5295, or by e-mail at penton@wrightsmedia.com. A complimentary subscription to IndustryWeek magazine is available to those who qualify. Fill out our online form at <http://www.submag.com/sub/iy?pk=W0105>. Distribution and use of this material are governed by copyright law. Copyright© 1998-2012 [Penton Media, Inc.](http://www.pentonmedia.com) All rights reserved.