

Dr. Zimmerman's TUESDAY TIP: August 16, 2011 (as referenced in *The Legal Pad* September-October, 2011)

Dr. Alan Zimmerman's Personal Commentary:

[O]ne of the fundamental rules in psychology is that behavior is a function of its consequences. And yet, all too often, when we get into a leadership role, we forget this rule and do just the opposite.

A few key guidelines:

1. Remember the powerful connection between performance and its consequences.

Lawrence Miller made that obvious in his book, "American Spirit: Visions Of A New Corporate Culture," when he implemented a new approach for 150 inmates of the North Carolina prison system. The inmates were told that in the future they had to earn everything they wanted. A bank came in and set up a checking account for each inmate, and every week every inmate got a personalized check with a certain number of points.

The size of the paycheck or the number of points was based on how well each inmate did on his job in the license plate factory or the print shop. If an inmate did a very good job, he was paid more points. And if an inmate did a poorer job, he was paid fewer points.

On the spending side, the inmates could turn their points into a number of desired items. They could choose to live in a luxury dorm (the best), a standard dorm (the regular), or an efficiency dorm (the lowest). They could spend their points on rent, on better food, on movies, on passes to visit their families, or a host of other choices ... just like you and I do when we get our paychecks.

You see, Miller was testing out a psychological hypothesis that we learn from our environment. If the environment says, "You don't have to do anything. You can just sit back and take a breather because we'll take care of you," guess what people are learning? They're learning to sit back and be taken care of. On the other hand, if the environment says, "If you want the goods, you've got to perform," guess what people are learning? They're learning from actual experience that performance pays off, so they have a natural tendency to work harder and work better.

So what happened in the prison? The license plate factory and the print job doubled their production ... simply by paying points for high performance.

Interestingly enough, the new system got tested one week after it was implemented. Two inmates said the new system was a bunch of bull, and they weren't going to play the game. They tore up their checkbooks.

Miller and the other managers said that was fine. They knew they couldn't kick the two inmates out of prison, but they had to figure out how to handle the situation. They placed them in the efficiency dorm or the lowest quality accommodation, giving them enough points to finance

their minimal living expenses. In essence, each of them was given a welfare check.

Of course, Miller and his associates had to ask themselves where those points came from? They realized that just like our society the productive people have to pay for those who aren't productive (whether by choice or disability). So they taxed all of the other inmates. The next week, when the other inmates got their checks, they soon realized two points were missing from all their checks. All of them marched up to Miller, very upset, and asked what was going on.

Miller explained that they had two inmates who didn't want to work. They were put on welfare, and somebody has to pay for that, in particular, they had to pay for it. Not surprisingly the two non-performing inmates who had torn up their checkbooks soon came begging for a job. They wanted to go back to work, and they wanted their checkbooks back.

This North Carolina prison created a culture where behavior truly was a function of consequences. Performance paid off. It paid to work and it paid to do a good job. And it didn't pay to tell the people running the system that it was a bunch of bull.

Always remember the powerful connection between performance and its consequences.

2. Look for performance you can reward.

Unfortunately, many managers and parents do just the opposite. They do negative scanning.

Just watch a division manager showing up at the field office. He walks through the office with his radar on. You can almost feel the beep, beep, beep of his radar as he scans the environment looking for what's wrong. Finally he says, "Come over here. I thought I made it clear that I want the assembly line arranged this way, not that way."

What happens? People soon learn to avoid the division manager. They try to remain invisible rather than focus on peak performance. And that is no longer feasible in a world filled with fierce competition.

We've got to reverse the process. We've got to do a better job of catching people doing something right. We need to have our positive scanners up and ready, fully operational ... because we know ... in reality ... for every 1 thing that goes wrong, there are 9 things being done right.

Now don't get me wrong. I'm not saying you should ignore poor performance. You should give feedback on poor performance, and you should provide consequences for poor performance. But if you have your positive scanning system doing its job properly, you'll find that your negative feedback is received so much better.

To see how well you're doing on this, start counting your positive and negative behaviors. Put a card in your pocket for a week, and every time you talk to someone, put a plus or minus sign on your card after you finish your conversation. Did you find something positive in the other

person's behavior or did you find something negative? Keep track. You may be amazed that you're doing the very thing that is killing off high performance in your organization.

The research tells us that the most motivating leaders, the most effective managers, and the best parents use a 4 to 1 ratio. In other words, they verbalize four times as many positive remarks as they do negative, and they give four times as many positive consequences as they do negative. If your ratio is any lower than that, you can bet you are not getting all the performance you might like from the people around you.

3. Remember that even little rewards count.

Somehow or other, excellent managers have figured out the value of positive recognition. So they're habitually looking for opportunities to make their employees feel good. They're looking for examples of high performance and letting people know they appreciate their high performance.

I saw that years ago when I began my speaking career at Honeywell. Warde Wheaton was in charge of the division competing for the U.S. torpedo contract that was worth hundreds of millions of dollars.

The Pentagon chose five organizations to do the initial design work. After a year's time, the Pentagon narrowed the potential vendors to only two, with Honeywell being one of them. They were each given some funding to cover another year's work for prototype development.

Finally the day came for Wheaton and his team to appear in Washington ... to learn whether or not they had been given the contract. They got it ... a contract worth millions of dollars and thousands of jobs. Obviously great news for Honeywell. A time to celebrate and recognize all the hard work that had gone into the project.

[E]ven the best, strongest, and toughest workers need to know that high performance counts. ... As Warde Wheaton and his team were walking down the street ... feeling good about themselves and the new contract ... Wheaton saw an ice cream truck on the corner. He bought his 4 VP's ice cream cones to thank them.

Then they got the idea that they wanted their employees ... who did all the work on the torpedo project ... to feel those same good feelings when they got back to Minneapolis. They rented an ice cream truck, drove it to the front of the building where the 200 engineers had been working, and called them all out on the lawn to give them ice cream cones. They even had a photographer take pictures of them.

[M]any years after that event, you could walk down the hallways of Honeywell, walk into the offices of those 200 engineers, and you would see a little picture of those guys and gals holding their ice cream cones up in the air.

Isn't it interesting that they saw fit to put the photograph on their walls? Those employees

accepted those ice cream cones and photographs for what they were -- a sincere thank you for a job well done. And my guess is the company got more performance from those people as a result of an ice cream cone and a photograph.

Little rewards count.

4. Do NOT reward poor performance.

I learned this several years when my daughter Rachel was about 7 years old. I'd go into the den about 8:00 each evening and find her watching TV. In my sweetest voice I would say, "Honey, it's 8:00. It's time to go to bed, sweetie pie." She'd say, "Okay, Dad, I'll be right there."

I would then return to whatever I was doing. About 15 minutes later I'd go back into the den and noticed Rachel was still watching TV. In a pleading voice I would say, "Rachel, come on now. It's past your bed time. Let's go to bed." She'd say, "Okay. Okay, Dad, I'll be right there. The program is almost over."

Again I would return to whatever I was doing. And again, about 15 minutes later, I'd go back in the den and find Rachel watching TV. This time with a firmer voice, I said, "Rachel. NOW. UP TO BED." She'd say, "Okay," turn off the TV and go right to bed.

I had to stop and think. What just happened? Why did it work the last time when my instruction did not work the first two times? My daughter may have been a brat, but she wasn't a fool. She had learned, and I had taught her, that there were no negative consequences when I used my sweet voice or pleading voice. She had learned that negative consequences only came when I said "Rachel. NOW." And she behaved accordingly. Behavior is a function of its consequences.

So think about it. What were the consequences for Rachel's nonperformance the first two times I spoke to her? You may be tempted to say, "Nothing. There were no consequences." But you'd be wrong. There were some very *positive* consequences. She got to watch an extra 30 minutes of TV. I was actually training her to be disobedient.

If you're trying to create a high-performance organization, team, or family, you CANNOT reward poor performance or just plain nonperformance. And yet that is exactly what we've done in hundreds of thousands of organizations.

We've taught our employees that serving time pays better than high performance. We've taught our employees that the bigger paychecks go to those who have worked the longest rather than those who have performed the most effectively. And that approach will never create a high-performance culture.

5. Do NOT give inadvertent negative reinforcement.

Remember our general rule? That behavior is a function of consequences? Sometimes, you unconsciously give people negative reinforcement for high performance. You kill off the very

thing you're trying to develop.

For example, your boss may have given you an assignment, saying she really needed someone to study their marketing programs to see what was working and wasn't working. You saw this as an opportunity to show off your talents; so you worked night after night and weekend after weekend on the report.

Finally, the day came when you completed your report and brought it to the boss. You went to her office and found her on the telephone. You stood in the doorway for a moment. She took the phone from her ear and asked what you wanted. You replied, "Remember that marketing study you wanted? Well, I have it all done."

"Oh, okay," she said. "Just put it here." You put the report on her desk and she went back to her telephone call. Days, weeks, and even months went by before you heard anything from the boss about the report, the report that you put so much of yourself into. Then, two months later, while passing your boss in the hallway, she says, "Oh, by the way, that was a good report. Thanks."

Well, you didn't feel rewarded, You felt punched in the gut, because your high performance was inadvertently overlooked.

That being the case, would you be more or less likely to work as hard on a similar report in the future? Probably less. The boss had unconsciously reduced the possibility of future performance by failing to reinforce you .

Quite simply, all desirable behavior must be followed by positive reinforcing consequences almost immediately. And I predict the very best managers, leaders, and parents in the future will be those who master this key to high performance.

Make every day your payoff day!

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