

Username: Sean Smith **Book:** Understanding and Managing Organizational Behavior, Sixth Edition. No part of any book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form by any means without the publisher's prior written permission. Use (other than pursuant to the qualified fair use privilege) in violation of the law or these Terms of Service is prohibited. Violators will be prosecuted to the full extent of the law.

In addition to making the connection between a behavior and its consequences, antecedents play an important role in operant conditioning. Antecedents are instructions, rules, goals, advice from other members of an organization, and anything else that helps employees realize what behaviors they should and should not perform and what the consequences are for different behaviors. Antecedents play an educational role by letting employees know the organizational consequences (such as a pay raise or a promotion) for different behaviors (performing at a high level or impressing the division president during a presentation) and, thus, what behaviors they should perform.²² For example, a rule (the antecedent) that three incidences of tardiness result in the loss of one vacation day (the consequence) lets employees know what will happen if they are continually late (the behavior).

Operant conditioning focuses on how organizations can use consequences to achieve two outcomes. One is increasing the probability that employees perform desired behaviors such as satisfying customers and coming to work on time. The other is decreasing the probability that employees perform undesired behaviors such as excessive Web surfing and making lengthy personal telephone calls at work. In the next section, we focus on the use of operant conditioning to promote desired behaviors in organizations; then, we describe how operant conditioning can be used to discourage undesired behaviors.

Encouraging Desired Behaviors through Positive and Negative Reinforcement

REINFORCEMENT

The process by which the probability that a desired behavior will occur is increased by applying consequences that depend on the behavior.

In operant conditioning, **reinforcement** is the process by which the probability that a desired behavior will occur is increased by applying consequences that depend on the behavior in question. One of a manager's major responsibilities is to ensure that subordinates learn and continue to perform desired behaviors consistently and dependably. In operant conditioning terms, managers need to increase the chances that this will occur. For example, they may want to encourage their subordinates to sell more products; assemble computer components faster; attend work more regularly; make more consistent use of safety equipment such as helmets, earplugs, and goggles; or provide higher-quality customer service.

IDENTIFYING DESIRED BEHAVIORS The first step in the use of reinforcement is to identify desired behaviors that the organization wants to encourage or reinforce, such as using safety equipment or giving customers good service (see Exhibit 5.1). Surprisingly, correctly identifying these behaviors is not as easy as it might seem.

To an outside observer, for example, paying a commission on sales seems like a logical way to encourage salespeople to learn to satisfy customers. In this example, making sales is the behavior that is the focus of the reinforcement effort. However, this approach may result in short-run sales but not necessarily satisfied, loyal customers. It might lead to salespeople adopting a hard-sell approach, pushing customers to buy items that do not really meet their needs. Thus, the behaviors that result in satisfied long-term customers—behaviors such as building long-term relationships and making sure customers buy what is right for them—have not been identified correctly. What has been identified is the amount of actual sales.

Similarly, a professor who wants to encourage students to participate in class might reason that students have to regularly attend class in order to participate. The professor might, therefore, decide to reinforce attendance by making it worth 5 percent of a student's grade. Most students do come to class, but they do not actively participate because the behavior the professor has reinforced is attendance, not actual participation. The professor has not correctly identified the desired behavior.

When desired behaviors are identified correctly, the second step in the reinforcement process is to decide how to reinforce the behavior. In operant conditioning, there are two types of reinforcement: positive and negative.²³

POSITIVE REINFORCEMENT

Reinforcement that increases the probability of a desired behavior by administering positive consequences to employees who perform the behavior.

POSITIVE REINFORCEMENT Positive reinforcement increases the probability that a behavior will occur by administering positive consequences to employees who perform the behavior. These positive consequences are known as *positive reinforcers*. To use positive reinforcement to facilitate the learning of desired behaviors, managers need to determine what consequences a given employee considers positive. Potential positive reinforcers include rewards such as higher pay, bonuses, promotions, job titles, interesting work, verbal praise, time off from work, and awards. Managers can determine whether these rewards are positively reinforcing for any given employee by seeing if that employee performs desired behaviors in order to obtain them.