

Shaping

Sometimes a desired behavior is unlikely to occur on its own or at any given point in time because an individual does not have the skills and knowledge necessary to perform the behavior or because the behavior can only evolve out of practice or experience. Consider, for example, a trainee who is learning to drive a bus in New York City. At the beginning of her training conducted by the firm's driving instructor, the trainee is unlikely to drive the bus properly and thus cannot be reinforced for this desired behavior. The instructor can use reinforcement to *stimulate* learning, however, by reinforcing successively closer approximations to the desired behavior (in this case, the proper handling of the bus in city traffic). Suppose the trainee initially jumps the curb when making left turns but after her sixth trip finally makes a turn that is still too wide but does not jump the curb. Even though the behavior was not at its ideal level, because the turn was a bit wider than it should have been, this improved behavior is positively reinforced by verbal praise from the instructor to increase the probability that it will occur again.

The reinforcement of successive and closer approximations to a desired behavior is known as **shaping**.²⁸ Shaping is particularly effective when employees need to learn complicated sequences of behavior. When it is unlikely that employees will be able to perform the desired behaviors all at once, managers reinforce closer and closer approximations to the desired behavior to encourage employees to gradually acquire the skills and expertise needed to perform at an adequate level.

SHAPING

The reinforcement of successive and closer approximations to a desired behavior.

Discouraging Undesired Behaviors through Extinction and Punishment

Just as managers need to ensure that employees learn to perform desired behaviors dependably, they also need to ensure that employees learn *not* to perform undesired behaviors. Examples of undesired behaviors in organizations include (among hundreds of others) excessive absenteeism, excessive Web surfing on company time, operating heavy equipment such as bulldozers and cranes in a dangerous fashion, and sexual harassing other employees. Two main operant conditioning techniques reduce the probability of undesired behaviors: extinction and punishment (see Exhibit 5.1).

EXTINCTION According to the principles of operant conditioning, all behaviors—good and bad—are controlled by reinforcing consequences. Thus, any behavior that occurs is performed because the individual is receiving some form of reinforcement for it. If managers wish to lessen the probability that an undesired behavior will occur, they need to first determine what is currently reinforcing the behavior and then remove the source of reinforcement. Once the undesired behavior ceases to be reinforced, its frequency diminishes until it no longer occurs. This process is called **extinction**.

Suppose every time a manager has a meeting with one of her subordinates, Sam, he always tells jokes and fools around. At first, the manager thinks Sam's joking is harmless, but soon she realizes that the meetings are taking twice as long as they should, that certain items on the agenda are getting short shrift, and that Sam is having a hard time remembering the important points made during the meeting. After attending a management development seminar on operant conditioning, the manager realizes that she is actually positively reinforcing Sam's behavior by laughing at his jokes. At the next meeting, she treats Sam cordially but refrains from laughing at his jokes. Sam looks a little perplexed, but soon stops joking and takes the meetings more seriously.

This example illustrates that extinction can be a relatively painless way to reduce the occurrence of undesired behaviors. The supervisor had considered talking directly to Sam or criticizing his behavior at their next meeting. Eliminating Sam's positive reinforcement for horsing around probably did less to hurt his feelings and disrupt their otherwise good relationship.

PUNISHMENT Managers do not have the time to wait for extinction to lessen or eliminate some undesired behaviors. Certain behaviors are so detrimental or dangerous they need to stop immediately. Just as a parent cannot rely on extinction to stop a child from touching a hot stove, a manager cannot rely on extinction to eliminate highly undesirable behaviors in the workplace such as sexual harassment or operating heavy equipment in a dangerous fashion. Under such circumstances, a manager can try to eliminate undesired behavior by using **punishment**—administering a negative consequence when the undesired behavior occurs.

EXTINCTION

The lessening of undesired behavior by removing the source of reinforcement.

PUNISHMENT

The administration of a negative consequence when undesired behavior occurs.