Punishment: Benefits, Risks, and Alternatives in a Business Setting

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Abstract

Punishment is utilized in many settings in the world today, but it is continually getting more negative responses for its use in the workplace. Punishment's main use is to decrease the occurrence of a behavior that is undesirable. In a business setting, this would most likely be a behavior that is a violation of policy or unsatisfactory work performance. A comparison of the positive aspects of punishment with its negative features, by utilizing information provided by scholarly journals and websites along with a survey of 31 employees, has yielded the results that there may be a better alternative to punishment.
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The Use of Punishment

Punishment is utilized in many settings in the world today, whether it is at home when a parent is not pleased with the behavior or actions of her child or when a man breaks a law and becomes a target of the justice system. Punishment is acceptable in numerous situations that occur everyday; it is ingrained into the human psyche that justice is served when punishment is applied. Punishment is used to teach, reform, and persuade individuals to accept what members of society view as acceptable or tolerable behavior. But is punishment a useful technique in a business setting? Does punishment deter behavior that negatively affects a business environment and thus clear the way for steadily increased performance and productivity levels, ultimately enabling the business to achieve more success? Does punishment hinder motivation? Does punishment have any place in the world of business?

The problem with punishment is understanding whether the aversive stimuli used to punish actually decrease nonconstructive behavior. By reducing undesirable behavior, managers hope to provide a path to productivity among workers. Is punishment a necessary stage in developing employees, or is it just one of many paths that can be taken? What are the immediate (expected and actual) and long term results of punishment on each individual? Does it impede employee job satisfaction, being resented by the same employees it is intended to direct and discipline? These are questions that need to be answered to form a conclusion about the usefulness of punishment. Areas in the workplace where punishment can be constructive as well as
areas where punishment is inadequate and unquestionably detrimental to the cause of the company will be analyzed.

Understanding Punishment

The Definition(s) of Punishment

“Many people define punishment as something meted out to a person who has committed a crime or other inappropriate behavior” (Miltenberger, 2004, p. 114). Applying this definition means that the punisher not only intends to end the behavior but also seeks retribution and hurt to the wrongdoer. The person being punished is seen, to deserve the negative effects caused by the use of punishment. Punishment, by this definition, is therefore used as a device to end the unacceptable conduct and as a tool of retribution. The negative aura triggered by the use of the word punishment is a result of this definition. Understanding this characterization is important when considering its use in a professional setting.

The behavior modification definition of punishment is the process in which the consequence of a behavior leads to a decline in occurrences of that behavior in the future. According to this definition the intent of punishment is to prevent future episodes of a particular behavior (Miltenberger, 2004). There are two ways punishment can be carried out—positive punishment and negative punishment. Positive punishment presents the addition of an aversive stimulus. If an employee commits a rule infraction, the first response according to a common discipline system in business, is a verbal warning. The verbal warning is an example of an aversive stimulus that was imposed as a result of a rule infraction. On the other hand, negative punishment removes a reinforcing stimulus. An example of negative punishment can also be derived from a common business
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practice. Some businesses will suspend a problem employee without pay. The removal of pay constitutes an exclusion from the reinforcing stimulus of being paid and therefore is a form of negative punishment (Barth, 2002).

Aspects of Effectual Punishment

There are four main factors that influence the effectiveness of punishment. The first is *immediacy*: “For punishment to be most effective, the consequence must follow the behavior immediately” (Miltenberger, 2004, p. 122). For example, if an employee makes an inappropriate comment and receives an angry glare from a co-worker, he would know that the glare was for the comment. On the other hand, if this same glare were given 30 minutes later, it is not as likely that the employee would realize why the other person is glaring at him. Secondly, *contingency* plays a large role in the success of punishment procedures. A punisher must follow a behavior every time in a consistent manner or risk diminishing the effect of the punishment system. If an employee is punished only one out of every 10 times he is late, he is not as likely to stop that behavior as he would be if the punisher were implemented every time. *Establishing operations* is the third identified factor in the effective use of punishment. An establishing operation is an event that changes the value of a stimulus as a reinforcer or punisher. A common punishment for an employee is when he is asked to stay late and finish work that has not been completed. Most employees would begrudgingly oblige, fearing bad reviews from the boss later on. However, if the employee knew that a friend frequently stays late and would be staying late that night, it would weaken the force of this aversive stimulus and thus an establishing operation would be formed. Conversely, if the employee would be missing an event that was particularly important to him, for instance his child’s sporting
event, the aversive stimulus of staying late would be much more powerful. The final factor for effective punishment is the difference in individuals and the magnitude of the punishers being used. Some intended punishers may not affect some employees because of the chosen stimulus or the extent of the punishment itself. Consequences that function as punishers vary from person to person. An event may be established as a conditioned punisher for one person but not for another. The magnitude and intensity of a punishment also affect whether a stimulus will function as a punisher. Generally, the more intense the aversive stimulus, the more likely it will serve as a punisher (Miltenberger, 2004). Based on experimental evidence, "...punishment seems to be most effective when it is immediate, firm, consistent, delivered in a variety of settings, and accompanied by a clear explanation" (Appelbaum, Bregman, & Moroz, 1998, p. 5).

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Now with the definition and aspects of effectual punishment understood, it is possible to analyze how punishment is currently used in professional settings. Most companies and professional businesses have a disciplinary policy. Wachusett Regional School District's Employee Handbook (2004), for example, exhibits regulations covering too much time on the phone or Internet, overextending break times, tardiness, smoking in prohibited areas, sexual harassment, or theft. These same prohibitions can be found in employee handbooks in corporate headquarters, private entrepreneurships, and virtually any business around the world. These types of rules are common, and they seem to be necessary to prevent inappropriate behavior. If further scrutiny is used, however, it is discovered that punishments for these actions are not always specifically stated. The threat of suspension or termination is usually coupled with a lesser punishment of
"disciplinary action". In Wachusett Regional School District's Employee Handbook (2004), these very words can be found next to the list of prohibited actions. The problem is that the "disciplinary action" is not defined and is therefore subjective to the individual manager which can lead to inconsistent punishments as well as confusion in the workplace on what is punishable behavior ("Why Punishment--, 'Do It Or Else...',--Doesn't Work," 2002).

An article in the Long Island Business News (The Associated Press, 2000) focused on the growing problem of gross misuse of the internet in professional work settings. This is one of many common problems that exist in businesses today and need attention. Most of the problem comes from "...deciding [on] standards and punishment for computer misuse" because it "...is an emerging ethical, moral and legal puzzle as an increasing number of workers go online with company computers" (p. 21). Examples of how some employees were punished included a Vernon school principal who forfeited three years of salary raises for viewing sex-related websites in his office and 40 Xerox employees that were dismissed as a result of vulgar abuse of Internet privileges. Stuart Johnston, a Dallas labor lawyer, stated, "What's important is to be sure the practices internally are consistent" (The Associated Press, 2000, p. 21). It becomes fairly obvious in the previous paragraphs that more consistency is necessary when using punishment.

If an employee were to break a rule and perform an act against the conduct code of the company, when would the punishment be carried out? It may be days or even weeks later. This answer is not as promising as many managers could hope. If an employee is doing something wrong or hurtful to the company, the manager most likely will not know about it immediately, if at all. This severely limits his opportunity to
administer a punishment soon after the offense in order to make sure the employee knows that the behavior was wrong and to administer a punishment which would in turn decrease the behavior. If a manager cannot punish a behavior immediately or consistently, then using punishment is not as effective ("Why Punishment--, ‘Do It Or Else...’--, Doesn't Work," 2002).

Punishment as a Tool in the Workplace

Punishment as a Mistaken Tool for Motivation

Punishment is sometimes wrongly appropriated as a motivational tool by managers to prod employees into work. One author wrote, “Controversy surrounding the significance of punishment with respect to its role and effectiveness in behavior control as well as society’s acceptance for this traditional method has encouraged many people in positions of power to use punishment as a means of control” (Appelbaum et al., 1998, p. 2). It has been noted that this technique can achieve positive results in the short term. It is used because managers find it effective to pit employees against each other in an attempt to form competition motivation. The main problem associated with this type of management is that, as noted before, the results are only short term and discourage relationships among front-line employees. Positive relationships form productivity that is more sustained, but when a manager needs quick results, most turn to fear motivation (Maccoby et al., 2004).

Punishment as a Control Tool

Using punishment as a control tool may foster an environment of fear in the workplace. One side effect of using punishment inappropriately is that employees become afraid to take risks. Risks allow companies to grow and gain competitive
advantage in the industry. An employee that works in an environment characterized by the use of punishment may have problems dealing with the pressure and focus on what he could lose if he failed instead of what he could gain if he succeeded. Appelbaum et al. (1998) identified five main types of risks that keep employees from taking chances, four of which apply directly to the fear instilled by the use of punishment in a workplace.

The first of these is the “fear of failure”, which is common in many employees and is even more extensive in employees under a manager practicing “fear motivation” (Appelbaum et al., 1998, p. 120). Experiencing competitive failure even once by an employee can be detrimental to his future effectiveness. If an employee works up the courage to try something new and then is punished for the results, this employee is far less likely to experiment in the future. Employees experiencing the fear of failure usually tend to avoid attention and maintain the status quo. This employee will let opportunities pass by and instead settle for doing what he feels he does well. In fact, risk-taking opportunities that could result in big gains for the company are seen as a source of fear instead of an exciting prospect.

The “fear of success”, though not thought of in the same light as the fear of failure, has the same effect as the fear of failure (Appelbaum et al., 1998, p. 120). Employees will hold back because the more successful a person is the more isolated he may become. Being successful, in the eye of this employee, only increases the distance to the ground when he falls and allows others to see the fall. This type of fear produces the same results as the fear of failure; the employee holds back and avoids taking a risk.

“Fearing what others think” has been a problem for many workers because they do not want to be singled out and targeted because of success or productivity (Appelbaum
et al., 1998, p. 121). If an employee is constantly worrying whether others have been
offended by his success, he will tend to try to fit back in the group by suppressing his
own talent. The opinions of others often control this employee’s thoughts or even his
actions. These employees tell others exactly what they want to hear and suggest answers
that are apparent. This leads to a lack of creativity in solutions and an employee without
an opinion.

Finally, the “fear of uncertainty” troubles managers and front line employees alike
(Appelbaum et al., 1998, p. 121). If the outcome of the event is not completely known
beforehand, an employee may be tentative to go through with the plan. This person is not
willing to risk the comfort and stability of his current situation by taking on more
responsibility or promotions. He will work on only concrete issues and decline anything
that might alter his present position. Obviously this lack of determination and fear of
risk-taking could be very harmful to the company.

Effects of Using Punishment as a Tool

It is known that punishment can create fear in the workplace. A negative effect of
this is that creating a fearful environment does not serve to motivate employees. In fact,
as a result of managers that use punishment and fear tactics, companies may experience
decreases in productivity, poor morale, high turnover, and lost profits (Casison, 2002).
Punishment techniques serve to increase a supervisor’s role ambiguity while also having
a negative effect on employee job performance and job satisfaction (Challagalla &
Shervani, 1996). Extensive punishment and fear tactics lead to a negative workplace.
Brenda Anderson, executive director for SITE, stated, “Once people get negative, it
spreads like wildfire” (Casison, 2002, p. 56). Can punishment work? The answer is still,
surprisingly, yes. Does punishment work? In most cases, when intending to find a motivator or change a behavior in a business setting, no ("Why Punishment--, 'Do It Or Else...',-- Doesn't Work," 2002).

When Punishment Works

To understand when punishment works, consider a recent article in the Fairfield County Business Journal. A recent survey conducted by KPMG Peat Marwick asked employees various questions on the topic of fraud, among other things. Sixty-five percent of the respondents cited that fraud was a problem in their companies, and 62% declared that the major cause of this was inadequate punishment for acts of insubordination; the employees were more willing to take the risk because the punishment was not severe. According to the employees themselves, it seems that punishment is not severe enough in businesses. Common logic would infer that punishments would need to be increased in businesses (Trends, 1999). However, punishment alone for disciplinary reasons will not work: “Punishment won't work for you because you can never punish in a way that meets the requirements for the effective use of punishment that psychologists have defined—immediacy, severity, and consistency” (Why Punishment--, 'Do It Or Else...',-- Doesn't Work, 2002, ¶2).

Punishment, in a sense, is reducing unwanted behavior by means of adding aversive stimuli or taking away positive reinforcers. Punishment can result in negative side effects including anger, aggression, and punishment effect (Appelbaum, et al., 1998; Why Punishment--, 'Do It Or Else...',-- Doesn't Work, 2002). Punishment effect is essentially performing at a level barely sufficient to avoid punishment. For example, if a person were asked how fast he was driving in a 55 mile per hour speed zone, he would
most likely answer at a number above 55 that he has established as a safe speed not warranting a ticket. This is because the individual has established a number that he can comfortably travel over the speed limit which he feels will not merit a speeding ticket (Why Punishment--,'Do It Or Else...',-- Doesn't Work, 2002). A worker will do the same. When punishment is used extensively, it tends to backfire as employees try to get back at their managers and hide information to shield themselves from retribution (Maccoby, Gittel, & Ledeen, 2004). In fact, the employee will not usually terminate the behavior, finding alternate ways of engaging in the behavior. In most instances, punishment in a business setting only leads to a brief restraint of the behavior because the methods of effective punishment, as discussed earlier, are not properly utilized.

Punishment, therefore, will only work if the right environment and tools for effectiveness are developed to the fullest extent. Any consideration to use punishment must be carefully thought out, planned, and carried out. Punishment, by its nature, evokes resentful behavior from the individual receiving the punishment, especially when each of the terms of effectiveness is not properly put into practice (Appelbaum et al., 1998). Punishment can never meet the requirements of effective punishment that psychologists have defined (Why Punishment--,'Do It Or Else...',-- Doesn't Work, 2002). If punishment is going to be used, it has to be immediate, contingent, and applied to all employees equally or it will not be accepted. It can also result in anger, aggression, and punishment effect (Appelbaum, et al., 1998). Punishment does not seem to be a successful solution to the discipline problems present in the workplace environment. If punishment is not the right choice for maintaining desirable behaviors in the workplace, other alternatives must be sought.
Punishment and discipline are often thought of in the same light by many people (Guffey & Helms, 2001). As previously noted, punishment as a consequence of a behavior leads to a decline in occurrences of that behavior in the future (Miltenberger, 2004). Discipline, on the other hand, has three distinct components. The first of these is the punishment for an infringement of a work rule or direct command. This essentially involves punishment alone. The second tier of discipline is training that shapes and fortifies the employee's behavior to that which is acceptable in the workplace. Thirdly, discipline is control gained by imposed compliance. Discipline is broader than punishment as it attempts to decrease unwanted behavior not only through consequences (like punishment), but also by education (Guffey & Helms, 2001).

**Progressive Discipline**

"Progressive discipline" is a technique employed by many businesses as a system for implementing punishment (Grote, 2001, p. 53). In fact, most companies use some form of progressive discipline whether the managers know it or not (Johnson, 1998). Progressive discipline has been a system utilized by businesses since the 1930s, forming after unions demanded a progressive system of punishment to allow an employee at least to know that he was at risk of losing his job. It follows the basic premise that a "crime" must be followed by a punishment, and that punishment must fit the crime (Grote, 2001). The term progressive discipline refers to an employer's attempt to modify an employee's undesirable behavior through the use of a series of disciplinary consequences that are
utilized based on the nature and history of an individual employee’s behavior (Johnson, 1998). Today, there are many arguments against using the progressive discipline model in its original state (Guffey & Helms, 2001). This technique cultivates resentment and hostility. If an employee is unsuccessful at meeting requirements, he is punished until he conforms to organizational goals. Using this system entails punishing an employee into compliance and therefore never developing a relationship of commitment (Grote, 2001).

The IRS adheres to the process of progressive discipline. Its procedures require first an oral reprimand confirmed in writing, second a written admonishment, next a suspension of 14 days or less, and if all else fails termination. The common progressive discipline model calls for four steps issued in a progressive manner. The first of these is an oral warning issued as an unofficial reprimand. The second stage is a more serious written warning. It summarizes the prior oral efforts and is discussed with the employee before being placed in the employee’s personal binder. The third stage is suspension. The employee is not paid during this period as it is an attempt to show the employee the seriousness of the problem and the necessity for change. The fourth and final stage is termination. This is only implemented after the previous steps have fallen short of success or in the case of a serious discipline violation (Guffey and Helms, 2001).

There are many negative aspects and arguments against the progressive discipline model that have been formed over the years. One flaw is that management may feel the need to address every performance defect and allocate the proper punishment. If this were the case, the manager would be extremely busy and employees would feel almost helpless. Another flaw is that management may concentrate solely on the problem employees, depriving the less troublesome employees of necessary attention (Guffey &
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It is known as the “80-20 rule”, meaning the most inflexible employees take up a disproportionate amount of a manager’s time and energy (Nicholson, 2003, p. 57). This process also focuses on employees’ past mistakes, with no attention to helping employees recommit to suitable performance (Guffey & Helms, 2001). The lack of positive reinforcement is detrimental to an employee’s job performance (Gross, 1999). Another shortcoming of progressive discipline is that it may encourage an antagonistic relationship between managers and employees. This process treats the employee like a child that does not have initiative or responsibility. The final noted defect is that managers may not want to play the adversarial role with employees and thus may create an environment of no discipline (Guffey & Helms, 2001). Some managers take the easy route and ignore their problem employees (Nicholson, 2003).

Positive Discipline

A situation at a Frito Lay plant exemplifies a technique that extended and improved upon the traditional model of progressive discipline. An unhappy worker had found a creative way of writing obscene messages about management before the chips were packaged and sent to stores. Needless to say, customers were not very happy about the situation, especially when other employees caught on and the messages multiplied. The more management tried to crack down on the problem, the worse it got. Something had to change (Grote, 2001).

The strategy Frito Lay decided to employ is called “discipline without punishment” (Grote, 2001, p. 53). Discipline without punishment is also known as “positive discipline” (Fortado, 1994, p. 252). It is implemented under the belief that every one of the employees, even the problem employees, are mature adults and will
respond as such when treated as such (Grote, 2001). Discipline is viewed as an opportunity to help someone take responsibility for his own behavior and to treat this person as if he is capable of change (McHale, 1995). The past methods of warnings, reprimands, and suspensions without pay are no longer used. This particular method actually involves paid disciplinary suspension in order to show the employee that the supervisor wants to resolve the problem in a way that will benefit both employee and company. The day off of work is a last resort to a manager and is to be used by the employee as a time to consider if working for this company is something he would like to continue to do. It is important to note that paying employees for a day off has raised concerns from many skeptics, yet these concerns have been tested and shown to be unfounded (Grote, 2001). The supervisor must keep in mind that punishment is not his goal when confronting the employee, but instead restoring the employee as a disciplined team member (Mills, 2001)

The first step of discipline without punishment is informal “coaching sessions”, which are referred to as “reminders”, in instances of behavioral or performance problems (Grote, 2001, p. 55). These are meant to show the employee that there is a problem and to treat him as a responsible adult capable of change. It is important in this phase to describe the problem and the change that should take place. This is to be done no more than twice. Next, formal reminders are issued. The manager will again discuss the problem, remind the employee that he is subject to company standards and policy, and gain the employee’s confirmed agreement to return to wholly acceptable practices. The second reminder goes over the same process as the first and is followed with a documented memo to the employee (Grote, 2001).
If problems continue to occur, as in the case with the Frito Lay plant, the final stage of the discipline process calls for the discipline-challenged employees to be given an ultimatum. Note that this is a last resort phase of the program. The uncooperative employee is allowed one paid day off of work in order to contemplate this ultimatum. The employee is asked to make a commitment to solve the immediate problem and make a total dedication to fully acceptable performances in every area of his duties, or simply to quit. Management would support any decision that was made by the employee and the employee is warned that any further disciplinary problems would result in termination. Terminations at Frito Lay dropped from 58 to two in only two years and the “atmosphere was transformed” (Grote, 2001, p. 55). Similar results have occurred in many corporations and businesses across the country. The Texas Department of Mental Health saw turnover drop from 48.5% to 18.5% in two years. The system has now been in place for over twenty years and has consistently managed turnover at 20% or less per year. GTE (before being merged with Bell Atlantic to form Verizon) implemented this plan and saw all grievances drop 63% and disciplinary grievances drop an astonishing 86% in one year (Grote, 2001).

Taking a quick look at discipline without punishment, it can easily be seen that it is set up very much like progressive discipline. The manner in which this progressive discipline is applied by the employer, however, is drastically different (Grote, 2001). The objective of each step is to obtain the employee’s agreement to improve performance, not threaten the employee with harsher penalties to come if the problem persists. Positive discipline uses a more horizontal approach to communicating with employees by talking to them as adults, instead of the past method of discipline, which
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was more like a parent-child relationship. Positive discipline stresses “corrective counseling”, which encourages and teaches the employee the standards that are expected of him (Guffey & Helms, 2001, p. 114). By the use of continuous improvement, discipline without punishment creates a more dependable employee (Guffey & Helms, 2001).

Techniques for Positive Discipline

Now that the structure of discipline within a workplace is understood, it is important to understand how to use it. Knowing how to use the system and executing that knowledge is extremely important in the success of the system. In fact, in the only study that really compared progressive and positive discipline, there was little empirical evidence showing a major difference between the two across field sites. The study showed that how the system was enacted may be more important than the system itself (Fortado, 1994). Positive discipline, however, is set up better to accommodate successful application and has had much success in the companies that have applied it. The finer details of this system are very important and need to be further explained, because without these details positive discipline becomes merely another form of progressive discipline.

Coaching sessions. The coaching sessions must be explained in further detail as they are a critical step in preventing subsequent actions on the discipline chain: “If a problem has reached the stage where it invites punishment, then it probably has not been dealt with constructively much earlier on” (McHale, 1995, p. 50). Handling individual employees, especially for the purpose of discipline is one of the hardest elements of a manager’s job. Nigel Nicholson (2003), of the Harvard Business Review, addressed
three steps to take when dealing with problem employees. His techniques are one way of conducting coaching sessions.

The first step in this process is to “create a rich picture” (Nicholson, 2003, p. 60). A manager must be able to understand his employee’s point of view. The manager must look at the problem not only from his perspective, but also the perspective of the employee. This can come from interviewing fellow employees or managers and the employee with which the problem has originated. The supervisor must also reflect on his own actions to see if the employee’s problem really relates to the supervisor himself. A manager may even ask a trusted employee or supervisor to discuss his opinion about how he is viewed by the afflicted employee in order to supply additional insight. The last phase of step one is to analyze the context of the situation. Are outside pressures affecting the employee or the manager’s prior dealings with the employee? Getting the answers to these questions will allow a manager to form an accurate perception of the situation (Nicholson, 2003).

In the second step the manager is to “reframe” his goals for the employee (Nicholson, 2003, p. 62). Once a manager understands what is causing the problem, he can better assess what needs to be done. The original goals the manager had for the employee may change based on this new information achieved through step one. For example, if an employee is seen helping all the other employees and neglecting his own work, a solution may be to move this person into a training position instead of punishing the worker for not getting a job done. This strategy allows for adjustments to be made for individual employees and puts each employee in a position for personal success as well as a better fit for the good of the company (Nicholson, 2003).
The third and final step is to "stage an encounter with the problem employee" (Nicholson, 2003, p. 63). This is a very formal coaching session. The importance of the meeting has to be stressed to the employee involved. A manager should tell the employee about the meeting a day or so in advance in order for him to prepare, telling him that it is a meeting to review and revise their working relationship. It is important to hold the meeting at a neutral site (like a boardroom) and allocate at least an hour for the meeting. Through this process the manager is instructed to begin the meeting by affirming how valuable the employee is to the company and a brief overview of how the manager perceives the problem. This is followed by the definitive statement that the problem will not continue any further as it is. The next series of questions is used to discover the causes of the problem behavior. The employee must not be allowed to avoid revealing this information by giving a simple assurance of the intention to change. This is an important stage of the process where the manager must be assertive, yet still show compassion for the employee. Through this series of questioning, an eventual moment of truth will arise when the problem is revealed and the employee must make a decision. The manager can use the information from the questions to formulate different scenarios that will better fit the employee without showing preferential treatment (Nicholson, 2003). The main objective is to present to the employee what is expected of him and come to an agreement that he will attempt to reach that standard (Grote, 2001). It is at this point when a plan of action must be formulated to ensure that future infractions do not occur (Murray, 2003).

Behavior modification. A behavior modification approach can also be used by a manager in coaching sessions as well as a technique for modifying the behaviors of many
employees at once. First a manager must understand the problem behavior using functional assessment. Functional assessment gathers information about the events or stimuli that precede (antecedent) and follow (consequence) a behavior and are functionally related to the occurrence of a problem behavior. For example, if an employee wanted a raise, asked for a raise, and then got the raise, functional assessment would identify wanting the raise as an antecedent to the behavior of asking for the raise which resulted in the consequence of getting the raise:

want a raise (antecedent) → ask for a raise (behavior) → get a raise (consequence)

It is obvious from this observation that behaviors are influenced by the antecedents and the consequences. Therefore, to decrease a less desirable behavior, as in the case with positive discipline, a manager must not attack the behavior, but the antecedents and consequences of the behavior (Miltenberger, 2004).

Through the use of “antecedent control procedures”, a manager can manipulate the antecedent stimulus that provokes the behavior and thus decrease the undesirable behavior (Miltenberger, 2004, p. 341). By using functional assessment, the manager can find the antecedent stimulus that leads to the undesirable behavior and differentially reinforce other stimuli that lead to more desirable behaviors (Miltenberger, 2004). A manager would best find the antecedents to behaviors by observing the employee, interviewing other employees, or interviewing the actual employee exhibiting the problem behavior (Nicholson, 2003).

There are many different methods to differentially reinforce stimuli that would lead to desirable behavior. One method is to arrange an establishing operation for the desirable behavior. This essentially is presenting an outside factor to change the value of
the stimuli. For example, an employee that has to focus on completing a project before its due date may post a calendar on his desk and mark off the days until the project is due. The result would hopefully be that the employee sacrifices other activities in order to complete the project because he is continually reminded of the deadline. Another technique in antecedent control is to decrease the response effort for the desirable behavior(s). If a behavior is easier to engage in, then the behavior is more likely to be performed, thus decreasing the frequency with which an undesirable behavior occurs. An example of this would be supplying employees with laptop computers. If the employee was limited to a desktop computer, his work could be performed only at his desk. When the employee has a laptop computer, he has access to his work whether he is at his desk or on the road attending business seminars. Another method of antecedent control is removing the prompts for undesirable behaviors. If the antecedent stimulus does not take place, then the behavior is much less likely to occur. If two particular employees constantly talked for extended periods of time in the break room, a common solution would be either to limit the time each could have in the break room or make the employees go at separate times. The antecedent stimulus of seeing each other in the break room would consequently be removed (or limited) and the behavior would decrease. A fourth method of antecedent control is removing the establishing operations for undesirable behaviors. Employees that are consistently late and are never addressed for it have an establishing operation of weak enforcement of rules that aids in the undesirable behavior. If the rule were enforced more strictly, then this establishing operation would no longer apply. A final technique for controlling antecedents is to increase the response effort for undesirable behaviors. For example, if two employees do
not get along very well and are positioned close in the office quarters, a reasonable response would be to move the employees apart. The response effort to get into a confrontational situation is much greater if the employees are apart, thus reducing altercations between the two (Miltenberger, 2004).

There are four main types of consequence reinforcers that prolong problem behaviors. The first of these is "social positive reinforcement" which occurs when a positively reinforcing consequence is delivered by another person after a behavior (Miltenberger, 2004, p. 261). An example of this would be the employee that asked for a raise and got it. The employee's behavior of asking was reinforced by the manager's response of granting his request. "Social negative reinforcement" is the second identified type of reinforcer (Miltenberger, 2004, p. 261). This is when another person terminates an aversive stimulus after a behavior is executed. If an employee were to complain about a particular job and then was asked to do another job instead, he just experienced social negative reinforcement. As a result of the behavior of complaining, the employees' aversive stimulus of a job that he did not want to perform was removed. "Automatic positive reinforcers" are not provided by others, but are an automatic consequence of the behavior itself (Miltenberger, 2004, p. 262). An example of this is the overwhelming sense of accomplishment the employee may experience for finishing a difficult project. The behavior of finishing the project is rewarded by the employee's joy. An "automatic negative reinforcer" is the final identified consequence reinforcer (Miltenberger, 2004, p. 262). This transpires when a person escapes from an aversive stimulus without being mediated by another person (Miltenberger, 2004). By deciding not to go to work, an employee utilizes the automatic negative reinforcer by eliminating the aversive stimulus.
of work and choosing not to go. A manager should understand the differences of reinforcers in order to formulate a better plan to decrease their use if reinforcing consequences are responsible for an undesirable behavior (Miltenberger, 2004).

There are two main methods to change behavior affected by a reinforcing consequence. The first of these is "extinction", is a procedure that eliminates the reinforcer after each instance of the problem behavior (Miltenberger, 2004, p. 287). It is very important to accurately identify the reinforcer, because without it the procedure will not reduce the undesirable behavior. Once the reinforcer is identified, it must be removed after every instance of the behavior, and the more successful the eradications of it are, the higher the likelihood of success. Failing to prevent the reinforcer from following the behavior reduces the chance of success by extinction. This is a very difficult method to use in a professional setting because it is hard to watch one employee closely enough to eliminate every instance of a reinforcer and collaborate with other employees to follow the same procedure.

"Differential reinforcement" is the second alternative to eliminating consequence reinforcers (Miltenberger, 2004, p. 311). There are three types of differential reinforcement; however only one directly applies to a professional setting: "differential reinforcement of alternative behavior" (Miltenberger, 2004, p. 311). This is a method that is used to increase the regularity of desirable behaviors and decrease the frequency of undesirable behaviors. This technique should be used only when the manager wants to increase the rate of a desirable behavior that is already occurring at least occasionally and has access to a reinforcer that can be delivered after the occurrence of the behavior. A manager must identify the desirable behaviors, the undesirable behaviors, and the
reinforcers for both. By reinforcing the desirable behavior immediately and consistently while eliminating the reinforcement of the undesirable behavior, a manager can increase the likelihood of the occurrence of the desirable behaviors. Suppose an employee at a manufacturing company continued to sabotage the assembly line because he was allowed to sit down and enjoy a cup of coffee and a cigarette after each incident (Miltenberger, 2004). A manager could choose to punish the employee, but punishment is not always the best solution, and the employee may find an alternate route to engage in his behavior (Appelbaum et al., 1998). Therefore, a differential reinforcement technique would be first not to allow employees to take a break when a machine breaks down, thus eliminating the reinforcing consequence. Secondly, a plan to give employees two ten-minute breaks, one before and one after a lunch break to be taken at anytime during the shift with the permission of the supervisor, would allow the problem employee an opportunity to drink his coffee without breaking down the machinery (Miltenberger, 2004).

*Using Positive Reinforcement with Communication*

A major step in this discipline plan is that it chooses positive alternatives to punishment. Discipline without punishment makes an effort to recognize employees that are already well-disciplined. A common complaint of employees is that they are rarely told when they are performing well. Positive reinforcement is a key factor in countering this grievance (Grote, 2001). In fact, it has been found that positive reinforcements are much more powerful than negative ones (Fortado, 1994). Kevin Gross called the process of using positive reinforcement CPR, or "continuous positive reinforcement" (Gross, 1999, p. 12). Using this technique is a process of showing genuine appreciation in
recognizing employee accomplishments. Giving positive feedback to employees that do
more than is expected of them, prevail over a calamity, or put great effort into a project
increase the likelihood that the behavior will happen again. It has to be done in a specific
and meaningful way to show sincerity (Simonsen, 1998).

Continual communication with employees is a major factor in reducing the need
for discipline. It is important to show employees informally that their roles and expertise
in their positions are valued. A simple statement of telling employees that they have the
ability to change can help build their confidence. Communicating expectations for
change and reporting continued successes will help to provide direction and guidelines
for employees to follow (Murray, 2003). Employee feedback is a key factor in providing
a means for communication. Surveys are the common method, allowing managers to
understand employee opinions. The appropriate use of communication can be one of the
driving forces in securing competitive advantage (Dempsey & Sanchez, 2002).

Need for Additional Research

Punishment is a technique used to decrease the occurrence of a behavior. There
are four main aspects of punishment that need to be met in order for punishment to be
effective (Miltenberger, 2004). Managers cannot meet these requirements on a consistent
basis and therefore have a difficult time successfully applying punishment techniques
(Why Punishment--, ‘Do It Or Else...’,-- Doesn't Work, 2002). Punishment has also been
used as a method to control employees. There are many negative aspects to using
punishment in this manner, including creating fear in the workplace (Appelbaum et. al.,
1998). A survey was conducted in order to discover employee opinions of punishment
practices used in their work environments.
Method

Subjects

This survey was administered to employees of three well-known companies that employ thousands of workers across America. The companies will not be revealed because of a confidentiality agreement and the fact that the focus is not on the company, but instead the atmosphere and employee responses. Most employees did not include their names or job titles, choosing instead only to fill out the survey. There were 31 total participants in the survey, 12 from the first company, 11 from the second company, and eight from the final company surveyed.

Apparatus

Surveys were printed and randomly given out to several employees from each company. The format of strongly agree, agree, disagree, strongly disagree was chosen in order to show how strongly an employee felt about a response while at the same time forcing the employee to make a definitive choice. The first seven questions were obtained with consent from a survey created by Opinions Incorporated (http://www.opinionsinc.com/cover-web.pdf, n.d.). The remaining questions were written by the researcher to address arguments against the use of punishment, specifically relating to information provided from secondary research. Each question in the survey was carefully selected in order to identify the main sentiment of employees and the use of punishment in their workplaces. Question eight was derived from the knowledge that punishment is more effective if the punished behavior is recognized as causing the consequence, and expected behavior is clearly defined. Question nine refers to fear that may be elicited in an employee from the use of ridicule as a punisher for an undesired
behavior (Appelbaum et. al, 1998). The tenth and eleventh survey questions were used to identify whether consistency, one of the four aspects of effectual punishment, is maintained in punishment. Applying a contingent and consistent aversive stimulus to a specific undesirable behavior is crucial (Miltenberger, 2004). The twelfth survey question is derived from research that has shown that punishment is more effective if the consequence to a behavior is known (Appelbaum et. al., 1998). The final question (13) was drawn from the term punishment effect, which is essentially performing at a level barely adequate to avoid punishment (Why Punishment--,'Do It Or Else...','-- Doesn't Work, 2002).

Questions one, four, nine, twelve and thirteen were included in the survey to gain a better understanding of the environment in which the respondents work. Questions two, seven, and eight deal with the effectiveness of the communication in the respondents’ offices. The third question of the survey related to the application of punishment within the work setting. Questions five, 10, and 11 were asked to determine if there is consistency and contingency in the application of punishment, which is necessary for effectual punishment (Miltenberger, 2004). Questions six and twelve were asked to investigate whether the company has set up a system that is clear and understandable in regards to presenting expectations and guidelines to the employees.

Procedures

The surveys reached participants from the three different companies by three different methods. Twelve of the respondents were contacted through the researcher’s sister, while eleven of the respondents were contacted by the researcher’s father. The remaining eight subjects were obtained through the manager of a local business that was
willing to allow the survey to be administered. Each employee filled out the survey at his own convenience. The employees were only instructed to fill out the survey based on their honest opinions. No employees were told of the intent of the survey and each was ensured confidentiality.

Results

Below is the survey and the tallied responses from the survey administration.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
<th>Percent Agree *</th>
<th>Percent Disagree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. When I think that the supervisor is wrong I don't fear punishment if I confront him or her.</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>81%</td>
<td>19%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. My supervisor regularly communicates with me about my performance.</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>45%</td>
<td>55%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. My supervisor does not play favorites in my department/work group.</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>39%</td>
<td>61%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. My department manager treats me fairly.</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>74%</td>
<td>26%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. There is consistency in our policies and procedures.</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>42%</td>
<td>58%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. The values of this company provide clear guidance to its employees for the type of behavior that is expected of them.</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>84%</td>
<td>16%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. My supervisor is very clear about the goals I have to achieve.</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>55%</td>
<td>45%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. In case of unsatisfactory work performance or violation of policy my manager takes the effort to explain my mistake and the behavior that is expected of me.</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>68%</td>
<td>32%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Un satisfactory job performance is often followed by ridicule or unfair treatment by my manager.</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>32%</td>
<td>68%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Every violation of proper employee conduct is always disciplined as outlined in the employee handbook.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>52%</td>
<td>48%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. Rule violations occur frequently and are usually not observed and/or punished by my supervisor.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>42%</td>
<td>58%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. All punishable behaviors are clearly outlined in the employee handbook along with the subsequent disciplinary action.</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>71%</td>
<td>29%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. The use of punishment in the office has lead employees to do just enough to get by.</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>47%</td>
<td>53%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Percentages were found by totaling respective agree/strongly agree and disagree/strongly disagree columns and dividing by the total surveyed.

The table was created based on the results of the survey. The agree and disagree percentages were found by dividing the total number of participants that agree or disagree by the total number of participants.
A majority of those surveyed felt that the values of the company provide distinctive guidelines to the behavior that is expected of all employees and that the employee handbook details all of the punishable behaviors and the ensuing disciplinary action to be used in the occurrence of a violation of policy. However, many of the respondents believed that their managers were not consistently punishing employees for violations of procedure. Most of the respondents also felt that their managers show favoritism in their work environments, meaning they do not punish every employee equally. Almost half of the employees surveyed disagreed that every violation of proper employee conduct is always punished as outlined in the employee handbook, while close to 60% responded that rule violations occur frequently and that employees usually get away with it.

It was found that most employees felt that their managers do treat them fairly and that they work in an environment in which they could confront their managers if they felt their managers were wrong. However, several of the respondents answered that they experience ridicule or unfair treatment from their managers after a substandard job performance. Also, many employees suspected that punishment has led employees to do just enough to get by.

Only about half of the participants felt that their supervisors regularly communicate with them about their performance and were clear about the goals they wanted employees to achieve. About one out of three surveyed did not believe that their manager takes the time to explain mistakes and the behavior expected of them in instances of unsatisfactory work performance or violations of policy.
Discussion

The number of participants was limited because of availability and individual company compliance. Although having such a small number of responses does limit the reliability of the results, much can be learned from the opinions of these employees. First, these data support most of the research in the previous pages. Managers have difficulty being consistent with the use of punishment as evidenced by the responses to questions three, five, ten, and eleven. Also, the data show that the improper use of punishment can lead to employees doing just enough to get by, making efficiency in the workplace a casualty of ineffective techniques. This survey also showed that some managers do instill fear into their employees, as evidenced by the 20% of employees that are afraid of punishment for confronting their managers.

Secondly, it can be seen that company policies are generally understood and set up well in the three companies. This was addressed by questions six and twelve in the survey. An overwhelming majority of respondents answered that their companies not only established values that provide a clear foundation for the behavior each employee is expected to adhere to but also outlined these behaviors in the employee handbook accompanied with subsequent disciplinary action. This indicates that the fault of the failure in the use of punishment may not fall solely on the company standards.

Finally, a point that this survey clearly made, is that managers in the companies surveyed do a poor job effectively using punishment and communicating with employees. Office favoritism was noticeably present and employees felt that there are inconsistencies in the punishments. There is a lack of consistency in policies and procedures, as unwanted behaviors go unpunished either because they are not observed or simply
because a manager does not administer the punishment for that behavior. Even with the limited number of surveys taken, ridicule, which is a form of punishment, was put into use by some managers as a mistaken tool to motivate employees into compliance of standards. It becomes apparent that punishment, as a form of behavior modification, is too difficult for any manager to apply completely and successfully. Steven Appelbaum (1998) wrote that punishment has to be immediate, contingent, and applied to all employees equally or it will not be accepted (Appelbaum et al., 1998). It seems that managers are in no position to comply completely with all of the requirements of effectual punishment. Punishment cannot work effectively because managers can never meet all of the requirements for success (Why Punishment--,'Do It Or Else...'-- Doesn't Work, 2002). Therefore, a system based solely on punishment will not be effective and other alternatives need to be sought.
References


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