

## Positive Reinforcement is a Good Management Approach

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### Introduction

Have you ever wondered what is the best management approach? Although there is no one approach which can be singled out as “the best”, some management practices are among the preferred ones. The *positive reinforcement* management approach is one of those. The theory was developed by B.F Skinner in 1974, his explanation for positive reinforcement was “What is love except for another name for the use of *positive reinforcement*? Or vice versa” (Skinner, 1974). The formal explanation for *positive reinforcement* is “a method for shaping new behaviour” (Catania, 2001).

This article will explore what *positive reinforcement* management is, how it can be used in the organisation setting and the benefits yielded from this practice.

### Positive Reinforcement Background

As mentioned above, *positive reinforcement* seeks to encourage the continuing of good behaviour shown by an individual. Among such theories as Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs and the Goal Setting Theory, the *positive reinforcement* approach can be used as a form of motivating someone to carry on doing something good that has been observed.

To further explain, according to Skinner’s [operant learning theory](#) (1938), by adding a rewarding stimulus after the desired behaviour, that behaviour becomes reinforced and is thus more likely to occur again. There is a lot more to Skinner’s theory but the basic concept of *positive reinforcement* is this: “Reward the behaviours you want to see repeated. As such, the term *positive reinforcement*’ is often used synonymously with ‘reward.’” (Positive Psychology, 2020).

### How can you use positive reinforcement in the workplace?

There are many ways that positive reinforcement can be used by leaders and others within the workplace. The two main reasons why *positive reinforcement* would be used in the workplace are 1. To acknowledge the desired behaviour and 2. Encourage the desired behaviour. To effectively achieve this, there needs to be a transformational leader in the organisation. Transformational leadership promotes motivation by inspiring employees to do their best (Burns, 2003).

Here are a few benefits of using *positive reinforcement* in the workplace (Newton, 2016):

- **Increasing confidence:** when employees feel that their efforts are being recognised and acknowledged, this can lead to a sense of self-worth which will help them to continue performing well in the future. For example, when you praise an employee for a good piece of

work, that person is likely to do that job very well a second time.

- Motivating effective workers: lack of reinforcement leads to job dissatisfaction
- Improving workplace morale: when employees feel appreciated and supported in their working environment can foster a happier working environment. An employee that enjoys coming into work every day is more likely to show an interest in their work and feel motivated to do a good job.

There are various categories where different acts of *positive reinforcement* management can fall under.

- Approval, Empowerment/Voice, Growth & Self-efficacy – a leader should never assume that an employee knows that they are doing well. It is a good idea to “catch them in the act” and give immediate praise for their work.
- Monetary/Benefits, Time-Off, Educational Support, Advancement – According to Positive Psychology (2020), the most powerful incentive in an organisation setting is money. This does not assume that everyone wants money but according to research, it is one of the biggest drivers of good behaviour.
- Work/Life Balance, Emotional Well-being, Health, Socialisation, Family Needs, Office Environment – Employees usually spend a large part of their time working in their respective organisations. Because of this, employers need to ensure that their employees are operating in a comfortable environment. Increasing their wellbeing may also motivate them to work better.

### ***Positive Reinforcement Examples***

Below are some examples of how leaders can encourage their employees to do better. Based on the categories above, the examples are matched for a better understanding.

#### Approval, Empowerment/Voice, Growth & Self-efficacy

Provide regular positive feedback for quality work	Provide opportunities to present work to colleagues
Provide opportunities to voice opinions	Provide flexible work assignments
Provide opportunities for advancement	Free meals

#### Monetary/Benefits, Time-Off, Educational Support, Advancement

Competitive salary	Education reimbursement
Employee discounts	Paid sick leave
Paid parental leave	Mental health allowance
Added vacation days	

#### Work/Life Balance, Emotional Well-being, Health, Socialisation, Family Needs, Office Environment

Flexibility to work at home	Onsite day-care services
Onsite gym	Retreats

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Desirable office space	Free meals
Flexible dress code	

### **How to use *positive reinforcement***

Some important things to bear in mind when you're using *positive reinforcement* as outlined by Newton (2016) are:

- Be genuine and sincere, otherwise, it's meaningless
- Reinforce immediately
- Avoid favouritism, if one person is getting all the praise and attention, others may start to lack motivation and morale
- This may be an obvious one, but be specific about what you are praising the employee for
- Reinforce often but unpredictably

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, for individuals to do better, it does not always mean punishing them to yield these results. It is not ideal to have employees fearing getting into trouble from time to time. At times some employees need encouragement and having the time taken to out to understand what is going on if other behaviour has been observed. *Positive reinforcement* is an effective form of leadership which is beneficial for both the employee and the leader.

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