

The 8 Principles of Human Behavior



To become a manager or supervisor who understands what it takes to really motivate people and spur them on to higher levels of performance, it is also necessary to understand the 8 Principles of Human Behavior. These principles apply at home, at school, as well as in a work environment. Fail to understand them, and you risk de-motivating people, either singly or as a group. The Principles of Human Behavior have everything to do with how people react – or fail to – to certain stimuli.

Here are the 8 Principles of Human Behavior, as they apply to manager/employee interactions in a work setting and how they relate to motivation:

1. Rewarded behavior tends to get repeated

The fact that rewarded behavior tends to get repeated applies to good behavior as well as to bad behavior. We've already established that good managers praise and reward outstanding performances at work, simply because it's the best way to see them repeated.

However, take the case of a five-year-old brat who embarrasses his mother at the supermarket checkout line by screaming at the top of his lungs that he wants some candy. Just to get the kid to shut up, the mother may well buy him the candy, in effect rewarding bad behavior. That bad behavior will surely be repeated the next time the brat is in the same store with his mother. This time he's likely to throw an even uglier tantrum to make his mother buy him his favorite candy.

The same holds true among adults in workplace settings. Take the example of two employees, both good at their jobs, who tend to have spats over personality clashes, and bring the disputes to their supervisor to act as a referee. The manager, who after all is probably vain enough to think that he or she has the wisdom of Solomon anyway, may well be tempted to referee the spat, save both combatants' egos, give in to each one a little and come up with a mediated solution. Although this on the surface may seem like good management, it's actually the opposite because it rewards bad behavior. This bad behavior, just like the supermarket brat's behavior, will also surely be repeated, and the supervisor will forever be pulled into more and more acrimonious spats. A much better solution would be to have the employees hash it out themselves. They need to figure out how to work it out as adults for their own benefit as well as the team's.

2. Unrewarded behavior tends to disappear

This basic principle of human behavior applies equally to bad behavior and good behavior. Unrewarded behavior will tend to disappear. When it's good behavior, that's bad. But when it's bad behavior, that's good. In the previous example, the brat in the supermarket will eventually figure out that throwing tantrums, if they are ignored, will not get him the candy, so he'd better devise some other strategy to get it.

And the two feuding employees, if they do not get the satisfaction of getting the supervisor's attention, will eventually stop feuding. Most likely they'll ignore each other and try to give each other a wide berth for a while. Those involved in the feud may loudly complain to others – anyone willing to listen – about the offending co-worker(s), but once they run out of people who'll listen to the same petty litanies, eventually they'll stop. Over the long run, they may even develop a grudging respect for each other, accept the former foe's presence and learn to work together as a team.

3. Intermittent rewards are more powerful than constant rewards

To motivate people, an unexpected reward is more powerful than something that comes at regular intervals.

Constant, expected rewards, like annual bonuses, most of which are guaranteed, or even weekly or monthly departmental luncheons, quickly become entitlements. As such, at best they are “maintainers,” keeping people doing the expected but no more. They are not capable of motivating anyone to step it up and get to a higher level of performance. If managers try to take away these constant rewards that have become entitlements, what was supposed to have been a motivator can quickly turn into a huge de-motivator.

Intermittent rewards, given on the spot immediately after an outstanding act, are more memorable because they have rarity value. They also proclaim loudly that the manager has really noticed – it’s not something that happens almost automatically after the employee completes another year of service.

4. Unrewarded behavior will increase before decreasing

Once again, this principle of human behavior – that unrewarded behavior tends to increase before it starts to decrease – applies equally to good as well as to bad behavior. If the brat in the supermarket doesn’t get his candy right away after screaming at the top of his lungs (in other words, he doesn’t get rewarded for bad behavior), he’ll throw an even bigger tantrum first – before he finally quiets and realizes that the same behavior will not net him the reward he seeks.

So it goes with adults in the workplace as well. Suppose an employee continually cuts it too close to a deadline, causing too much tension at deadline time and affecting the whole team. The manager then moves up deadlines to build in more time for last-minute needed adjustments. The deadline-challenged employee will at first kick up a fuss, saying he shouldn't be punished like this. He'll seek support among co-workers for some kind of protest. He'll show some passive/aggressive resistance, maybe creating a near-insubordination situation for the manager, before he finally realizes that nothing is going to change the situation and he grudgingly takes whatever steps are necessary to make sure he meets the moved-up deadlines.

5. Punishment works, but at a high cost

Motivation is mostly about positive reinforcement, such as recognition, rewards, praise, appreciation, caring and making it fun. Is it possible to motivate people by negative reinforcement, in other words discipline or punishment, or rather the threat of punishment? Punishment does work, but at a high cost. If a manager threatens to suspend without pay, or even terminate an employee for habitual lateness if he or she comes in late one more time, the employee will probably be on time for the next couple of weeks or so. But all the while he'll resent the manager and the company and focus on the sword of Damocles hanging over his or her head instead of on the task at hand. Punishment, or the threat of punishment, should only be used as a last resort.

Of course, managers need to give corrective feedback from time to time to change behavior harmful to the company and the team. It is generally best to couch such feedback in terms of coaching rather than punishment. Managers may be angry at the person for displaying the behavior that needs to be corrected, but a display of anger usually results in escalation. It is better to cool off for a moment, consider what the desirable outcome is, and approach the offending employee in a calmer state of mind.

Corrective feedback should always be given in a private place – no one likes to receive criticism in public – and should be specific, related only to the behavior that needs to change. It may help the manager to relate an anecdote in which he or she, at an earlier time, made the same mistake. That helps reduce the accusatory nature of the disciplinary encounter. Corrective feedback should also focus on things that the employee can actually change, such as behavior and events. Never generalize or make it about character traits: “You’re always too argumentative, and you’re too slow, too.”

6. Give people what they need, they’ll give you what you need

This principle is based on the fact that there is a subtle difference between “needs” and “wants.” Employees may want lots of things – a raise, a different office or cubicle, different hours, a different job, a promotion, a different parking space, a liverwurst sandwich for lunch, whatever.

The point is that “wants” are superficial and even if “wants” are somehow obtained, they have little lasting effect. The next day they’ll “want” something else. Wants never stop. People never stop wanting things they don’t have, but once they get them, they’ll want something else.

If managers give in to their people’s “wants,” they’ll do little to motivate employees long-term.

Needs are different. Needs are the things that are essential for people to have success in their jobs. That’s what good managers provide so their people — and consequently their teams — can have success.

People need the right work tools to be productive and effective; they need the right skills and the right training. Managers can make sure they have just that to make them feel more confident, capable and self-fulfilled – and thus more motivated to aspire to higher levels of performance. Their needs fulfilled, they will be motivated to give the organization what it needs from them.

7. Life isn't fair, but people expect it to be so

People are perennially searching for justice and fairness, in life in general and in the workplace, as well. They look to their supervisor to make the workplace fair at all times, which may not quite be possible. If a family member gets cancer but no one else in the community gets it, people tend to rail against the unfairness of it all. In school, if one student gets caught for a prank and receives the appropriate punishment for it, but five others guilty of the same offense aren't caught and get away with it, the students (and sometimes their parents, too) may rail against the unfairness of it all.

In the workplace, people are forever looking at their own workload vis-à-vis that of others and may complain that it's too much and therefore not fair. Despite the fact they worked hard on a project or a sales campaign, they may not see the work crowned with the desired success, and therefore they may think the deck is stacked against them.

Of course life isn't fair, but that's hard for some people to accept – at home and at work. The best thing managers can do to keep their people on an even keel and not make them lose their motivation is to manage expectations. Managing expectations, through the inevitable highs and lows, can do a lot to maintain people's motivation long-term.

8. Healthy relationships are fairly balanced

Again, this principle applies equally in private life as at work. Close friendships will deteriorate if only one of the two parties makes an investment in maintaining it. Marriages may get rocky and end in divorce if only one party makes an effort to infuse it with new energy.

The same goes for the relationship at work between motivated employees and their managers. If an employee does not see over-and-above performance appreciated, recognized and rewarded by the manager, the relationship is no longer balanced and healthy.

Conversely, if an employee is given everything he or she needs to excel, and knows that extra efforts will be rewarded, but fails to respond with improved performance, that relationship is also out of balance and will become unhealthy. It may even result in discipline or termination if balance isn't restored.