



## The Laws of Behavior: A Global Leaders' Secret Weapon

By Aubrey C. Daniels

**W**hen organizations begin to work globally, they are often overwhelmed by the apparent challenges—new country, new language, different customs, and more. However, these obvious differences often distract leaders from the task at hand—to produce an efficient and effective product or service at a profit.

**Catch and positively reinforce people in the act of doing what you want, and you will always get better results.**

—Aubrey C. Daniels

## WE'RE DIFFERENT

For as long as I have been consulting with businesses, over 40 years, I have heard people say, "We're different." When telling someone in the North about a successful engagement in the South, they would immediately say that they were different from the people in the South. Regardless of whether it was one southern bank talking about success to another southern bank, one office or bank in the same company, or one department of the bank to another, they would all describe themselves by saying, "We're different." And you know what? They are right! Every supervisor and manager creates a work culture that is different from every other one in the organization. So it should not be surprising that when we travel sometimes several thousand miles that people would be substantially different. Unfortunately, too many managers and executives focus on the differences rather than the similarities.

Although the obvious characteristics are different in that we look different, talk different, and act different, under the skin we are

all pretty much the same. If I were to go to the emergency room in China they would not need to know where I was from to locate my heart. They would not need to look up the average body temperature of citizens of the US. As a matter of fact, although my brain may be smaller than some and veins and arteries that feed it may be in slightly different places from others, my occipital lobe would be in the same place in my skull as those in China.

To manage cross-culturally, leaders need to acquire a secret weapon that is universal, one that translates in a global environment; something that will undeniably work no matter the setting or circumstances. That secret weapon is a practical understanding of the laws of behavior.

## NO, WE ARE ALL THE SAME

As it applies to business and in life, one way we are all the same is that we all follow the same laws of behavior. If that were not so, they would not be laws. I have a friend that calls me from time to time to check to see if the laws of behavior are still on. Of course, I laugh and tell him that they are still operating like they always have been and always will. Whether in China, India, England, and Pakistan, all people obey the laws of behavior. When day turns to night, people in all countries look for electricity or fire to light their way. It is pre-ordained. We can't escape them any more than we choose to exempt ourselves from the laws of nature. One may say that he doesn't believe in gravity, but he will still fall if he walks off a roof. On visiting Saudia Ara-

**After all, science is essentially international, and it is only through lack of the historical sense that national qualities have been attributed to it.**

— Marie Curie



bia, we don't need to ask, "If people run long distances here, do they get hot and sweaty?" By knowing the laws of nature, we can operate in different environments and know certain ways to respond to them even without asking.

If the laws of nature are helpful in dealing with differences in the physical environment, might the laws of behavior be helpful in dealing with differences in a global economy? The answer is, of course, yes.

I have worked with people in more than 20 different countries to use the laws of human behavior to improve the performance of their organizations. In each instance, they successfully solved problems related to performance, quality, cost, morale, and safety.

## HOW CULTURE FITS WITH THE LAWS OF BEHAVIOR

A culture is nothing more than the characteristic or typical ways that a group of persons behave. These characteristic ways of behaving come about by patterns of reinforcement and punishment. Understanding a culture requires:

- To map which behaviors are typically reinforced and which are typically punished.
- To discover what things and actions act as reinforcers and punishers.

Although these two characteristics may require some time to understand fully, knowing how to identify them gives leaders a distinct advantage over those who see a culture as something that requires a complex analysis of a society, its history, and the subtleties of its language and economic and political systems. Not that these are unimportant over the long term, because they can provide information on the culture's contingencies or reinforcement and punishment, but they are not necessary to get to work.



If you, as a leader, do only one thing, it should be to fully understand the power of positive reinforcement and how to put it to good use.

## WHAT IS A POSITIVE REINFORCER?

Technically speaking, a positive reinforcer is any consequence that follows a behavior that increases its frequency. By this definition, an attaboy, a warm fuzzy or a pat-on-the-back are not positive reinforcers unless they increase the behavior that they follow. Yelling and screaming at someone may be a positive reinforcer if it increases the frequency of the behavior that generated the yelling and screaming.

It could be that negative attention for the person is better than no attention at all. By the same token, telling someone that he has done a good job would be a punisher if the person stopped doing what he has been complimented for doing. If the person doesn't like or trust you, he may have to interest in doing something that would please you. We know reinforcers and punishers by their effect, not by what was done or by the intent of what was done.

Simplistic notions of positive reinforcement create more problems than they solve. Banks and financial institutions tend to use what they know as reinforcers—money and tangible objects and rewards. While tangible rewards certainly have their place, they are woefully inadequate to bring out the best in people because they fall short on the critical aspects of reinforcement that maximize behavior or performance.

There are four considerations or rules for the efficient and effective delivery of positive reinforcement, no matter where in the world you use them:

**Make it personal.** To be effective, the reinforcer must be meaningful to the receiver. Some people hate to be recognized for anything in public, but many like it. Find out what is meaningful to the individual.

**Make it immediate.** The longer you wait to reinforce desired behavior, the less effective it will be. Catch and positively reinforce people in the act of doing what you want, and you'll always get better results.

**Make it frequent.** One positive reinforcer will not make a habit. In some athletic performances, it takes hundreds of positive reinforcers to get to peak performance. At work, there are a great many behaviors that require the same level of reinforcement. We have been asked many times, "Can you reinforce too much?" If you do it wrong, one time is too much. If you do it correctly, don't worry about it. After all, does a golfer ever tire of being told, "Good shot?" People almost never complain of too much reinforcement. They frequently complain of too little.

**Make it earned.** Indiscriminate praise is a very bad practice. Bad for the person receiving the praise and for the person giving it. Benjamin Franklin recognized this when he wrote, "Praise all and blame all are two blockheads." People respect most what they earn, and they respect leaders who deliver reinforcement contingent on some accomplishment. Leaders who reinforce the good, the bad, and the ugly alike are weak leaders who do not have the respect of the followers.

As you can see, money is an effective reinforcer when you follow the rules above. The problem is that when using money, it is difficult to follow the rules. Money cannot be given frequently in most organizations. Money is most effectively used as a back-up to social reinforcers. A social reinforcer can be any interaction that lets the performer know that he is liked, valued or appreciated through some action other than money or the things that money can buy. Examples include getting the people to tell you how they were able



to accomplish a difficult task, asking their permission to share their ideas and work practices with others, visiting them in their work space rather than in your office and having a conversation about how things are going in their lives. Of course, smiles, waves, thumbs-up and other non-verbal ways of communicating your pleasure with employees' performance can never be over-done and are almost always appreciated and motivational.

**We all live with the objective of being happy; our lives are all different and yet the same.**  
— Anne Frank

In some cultures, physical gestures such as thumbs-up may have different meanings. While it is generally positively received in our culture, it is not in all. We discovered that in certain work settings, calling people by

their first name was not a reinforcer as it typically is in the US. Physically patting someone on the back also may not go over well in most workplaces.

### WHY POSITIVE REINFORCEMENT?

Positive reinforcement is the most powerful interpersonal tool known. It is true around the world. Although there is a time and place for negative consequences for behavior, the only way you ever get a group of people to work at consistently high levels is with positive reinforcement. While there are obvious interpersonal benefits in terms of teamwork and general work atmosphere, from a financial perspective it is the only behavioral consequence that captures the highest value for both the person and the organization.

Knowing the importance and impact of positive reinforcement on the performance of an organization, the first thing you should do when going to another country to work is to establish yourself as a positive reinforcer. That is, someone people want to please and to be around. Employees seek out these people for their opinions and advice, and most importantly, they give these people their best effort.

The way you become a reinforcer in a new culture is to let employees teach you something. Ask questions that would let the employees demonstrate their knowledge and experience. Give them a socially acceptable way to tell you how industrious and clever they are. Once you've shown interest in their accomplishments and that you value them, they will almost always reciprocate by giving you their best.

When you know positive reinforcement as a scientific concept, rather than a common sense one, differences are a way to create hybrid vigor in an organization and in your own life. You will see differences not as a barrier but as something to celebrate. Too many organizations inadvertently reinforce behavior they want less of and punish behavior that they want more of. When you know the laws of behavior, you are less likely to make these mistakes and more likely to create a strong partnership that is positively reinforcing to all. As the French say, "Vive la difference."

This so-called weapon is really not so secret to those who Understand and can apply the laws of behavior.

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## [About the Author]

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Aubrey is a thought leader and expert on management, leadership, safety and workplace issues. For the past 40 years, he has been dedicated to helping people and organizations apply the laws of human behavior to optimize performance. Aubrey is the author of *Bringing Out the Best in People*, *Oops! 13 Management Practices That Waste Time and Money (and what to do instead)*, *Safe by Accident? Leadership Practices that Build a Sustainable Safety Culture* and three other business books. When Aubrey is not working on changing the way the world works, he enjoys golf and spending time with his family.

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## [About ADI]

Regardless of your industry or expertise, one thing remains constant: People power your business. Since 1978 Aubrey Daniels International (ADI) has been dedicated to accelerating the business and safety performance of companies worldwide by using positive, practical approaches grounded in the science of behavior and engineered to ensure long-term sustainability. ADI provides clients with the tools and methodologies to help move people toward positive, results-driven accomplishments. Our clients accelerate strategy execution while fostering employee engagement and positive accountability at all levels of their organization.

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