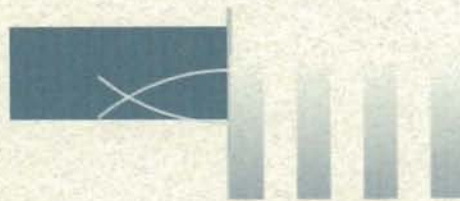


Leadership
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Organizational Management
Journal



Leadership & Organizational Management Journal

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Volume 2007 Issue 4

Workplace Punishment for the 21st Century

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Abstract

Conventional wisdom in organizational behavior management fields holds that punishment is to be avoided. This paper explores this belief by first defining punishment followed by a brief review of the reasons against the use of punishment. A discussion suggesting the efficacy of punishment in certain situations is then offered. In concluding the paper, ethical considerations of using organizational punishment are addressed.

“It ain’t what you don’t know that gets you into trouble.

It’s what you know for sure that just ain’t so.”

--Mark Twain

As was his style, astute observer of human nature, Mark Twain, said it simply in his quote above: preconceived ideas reflecting our personal prejudices and biases get us into trouble. Over a century later, Levitt and Dubner (2005) said it more formally in their wildly successful book, *Freakonomics* (Levitt & Dubner, 2005). One of the key ideas Levitt and Dubner presented

was that conventional wisdom¹ is often wrong and that truth is not always politically correct or as reassuring as one would like. Conventional wisdom, according to Levitt and Dubner (2005) holds, for instance, that real-estate agents have their clients' interests foremost in mind, that guns are more dangerous than swimming pools, and that then mayor, and current presidential hopeful, Rudy Giuliani, rid New York of crime by purging the squeegee men and cleaning up the subways. One such belief not cited by Levitt and Dubner, but surely attaining the status of conventional wisdom in behavioral management areas, holds that punishment or aversive control² should be avoided.³ Indeed, many individuals will cite their Psychology 101 courses to indicate that only positive reinforcement should be used to motivate people.

Negative Views of Punishment

The most frequently cited reason why punishment should not be used is because of its undesirable emotional and behavioral side effects such as poor morale, lower productivity, and theft (e.g., Arvey & Ivancevich, 1980; Lussier & Achua, 2007; Moorhead & Griffin, 1995). This research argues that although punishment may provide short-term benefits such as temporary subordinate compliance, momentarily suppressing undesirable behavior, it fosters long-term costs in terms of negative behaviors and attitudes, including resentment, hostility, and even sabotage. Other scholars believe that punishment commonly causes anxiety, passivity, withdrawal, or aggression toward punishing leaders (Howell & Costley, 2006). Additionally, Organ and Hamner (1982) believed that punishment was wasteful of managerial time because for it to be successful continued monitoring of behavior was necessary.

Management and leadership textbooks also reflect this unfavorable view of punishment and scarcely address punishment or discipline at all (e.g., Daft, 1994; George & Jones, 2008; Lussier & Achua, 2007), implying that the topic is not an essential part of the managerial role. Some experts have even argued that truly effective punishment may not be possible and that managers should therefore try to avoid punishing their subordinates (e.g., Sims, 1980). In the psychology literature renowned behaviorist B. F. Skinner (1953, 1971) eschewed the use of punishment and became the foremost advocate of positive reinforcement in the service of humankind. Similarly, Ferster (1967) expressed the common view when he said, "It has been clear for some time that many of the ills of human behavior have come from aversive control" (p. 341). Furthermore, in *Coercion and Its Fallout*, Sidman (1989) worried about the negative side effects of aversive control: "People who use punishment become conditioned punishers

themselves.... Others will fear, hate, and avoid them. Anyone who uses shock becomes a shock” (p. 79).

Another reason for not using punishment is that it is sometimes viewed as an unethical and inhuman practice (Arvey & Ivancevich, 1980). Most individuals advocating this position think the practice of punishment is not necessary, conceptually or empirically, to human society and is simply an approach seeking retributive justice rather than a way to achieve desirable future behavior (Ball & Sims, 1991). Some radical social thinkers from time to time have even advocated its abolition (Bedau, 1991; Skinner, 1948).

Such negative opinions of punishment and other aversive control techniques are consistent with the view that there is no virtue more desirable in Western civilization than being positive. Philosophers, theologians, teachers, psychologists, and academic and popular management gurus place a premium on being positive as a means of achieving productivity (Judge, Erez, & Bono, 1998) and personal growth and effectiveness (Neck & Manz, 2007). According to Fineman (2006a), the power of accentuating the positive is pervasive in American society and has acquired the status of a celebrated movement.

Because of the long history of disparaging aversive control and punishment, commentators seem reluctant to discuss aversive control or punishment and often reframe their activities to communicate a more favorable impression such as constructive punishment (Baron, 1988), positive discipline (Harvey & Sims, 2005), corrective counseling (Hill, 1984), progressive discipline (Guffey & Helms, 2001), discipline without punishment (Grote, 2006), corrective action (Rogers, Dillard, & Yuthas, 2005), and positive self-discipline (Hilgert & Leonard, 1998). People often feel that it is acceptable to use discipline but that it is somehow not acceptable to use punishment (Hartshorn, 1998).

Efficacy of Punishment

Despite conventional wisdom that suggests that it should be avoided, punishment remains an important aspect of virtually all managerial jobs (Butterfield, Trevino, Wade, & Ball, 2005) and is a common occurrence (Atwater, Camobreco, Dionne, Avolio, & Lau, 1997). Miner and Brewer (1976) found that 83 percent of the companies they surveyed used punishment or threats of punishment to deal with employee problems. Sims (1980) indicated that “managers eventually do use aversive behavior [punishment] even though they may be reluctant to admit it” (p. 57).

The importance of aversive control is further highlighted by the fact that most employee handbooks and organizational policy and procedure manuals give considerable discussion to punishment and disciplinary procedures. Additionally, many followers realize the importance of punishment when it is used carefully. One study showed that almost 50 percent of workers believed that managers are too lenient with poor performers and more discipline was necessary (Veiga, 1988). Thus, in following conventional wisdom regarding punishment and aversive control we may be throwing the baby out with the bathwater. The overemphasis on refraining from punishment and other aversive organizational control techniques must allow for the possibility that, at times, they are necessary and appropriate.

The following discussion presents several findings that, taken together, strongly suggest that aversive control can be an important motivation and control technique and not something to be avoided. First, a brief review of differences between reward⁴ and punishment is given that suggests that the two classes of consequences have similar processes. Then the evolutionary importance of punishment is discussed followed by a review of some positive aspects of aversive control.

Punishment and reward

Reward is frequently proposed as a substitute motivator by those having pessimistic views of punishment (Organ & Hamner, 1982; Skinner, 1953, 1971). This belief suggests in some fashion that punishment and reward involve quite different processes. However, Johnston (1972) argued persuasively that the relationship between punishment and reinforcement “are the same except that punishment results in a *decrease* and reinforcement results in an *increase* in the future probability of a behavior following the contingent delivery of stimulus for that behavior” (p. 1034). This is consistent with Azrin and Holz (1966) who described “punishment as a process similar to positive reinforcement in term of its determinants, but opposite in terms of the direction of behavioral change” (p. 339).

Such a process similarity has relevance for arguments against the use of punishment. For instance, as indicated above, some researchers (e.g., Arvey & Ivancevich, 1980; Organ & Hamner, 1982) have said that the effects of punishment are temporary and only suppress the undesirable behavior until the threat of punishment is removed while implying that the effects of rewards are relatively long lasting. Johnson (1972) rebutted this claim and noted that the effects of punishment are no more temporary than the effects of rewards, and the longevity of both is

dependent on the control of the rewarder or punisher. Similarly, the pessimistic assertion that for punishment to be effective, continued monitoring is necessary, which is wasteful of managerial time could be equally said of positive reinforcement. That is, time and effort to effectively administer punishments and rewards is comparable. Supervisors must be adept at monitoring employee behavior and delivering appropriate positive or negative consequences—an important and time consuming task, but not a time-wasting activity. When managers do a poor job of delivering appropriate consequences as in rewarding poor performance and/or punishing good performance (Campbell, Von Bergen, & Gaster, 2003), then worker motivation and performance suffer. Moreover, in some cases rewarding certain behaviors may be problematic—at least at first glance. For example, in the context of ethical decision making, rewarding individuals who act according to ethical standards may be viewed as infeasible and foolish. It says, “We don’t really expect you to be ethical and if you do, we’ll be so surprised that we’ll give you a reward” (Bennett, 1998, p. 260). Similarly, complimenting a follower every day for coming to work on time will probably embarrass the follower or make the leader seem less than genuine (Howell & Costley, 2006).

Furthermore, it seems as irrelevant to consider the question of whether or not punishment should be used with humans as it is to ask whether or not rewarding stimuli should be used (Azrin & Holz, 1966; Gardner, 1969). It appears impossible to eliminate the use of punishment with humans except in one area, the use of humanly administered physically punishing stimuli in institutional settings (Azrin & Holz, 1966). Bandura (1969) noted that much of human behavior is shaped by naturally occurring punishment (e.g., touching a hot stove or frowns from a spouse) and we typically learn things quickly without any lasting undesirable side effects.

Evolutionary value of punishment

Humans may be predisposed to use aversive control methods because of their evolutionary value. Researchers have determined that cooperation and altruistic behavior have survival value for humans and that one procedure in stabilizing human cooperation at high levels is the punishment of norm violators, defectors, and individuals inclined to free ride on the efforts of others (Henrich, 2006). Conversely, cooperation often diminishes when punishment of such individuals is ruled out or is not an available option (Fehr & Fischbacher, 2003; Güererk, Irlenbusch, & Rockenbach, 2006). This view was supported by Henrich, McElreath, Barr, Ensminger, Barrett, Bolyanatz et al. (2006) who found from 15 diverse populations that all

peoples demonstrated willingness to administer punishment as unequal behavior increased and that punishment positively covaried with altruistic behavior across populations. In line with such research, Wagner and Harter (2007) noted in organizational contexts that “few factors are as corrosive to employee engagement as a colleague who skates through the workweek, taking advantage of others’ hard work” (p. 5D) and suggested that punishment of such individuals may be appropriate. Thus it appears that punishment of slackers and free riders has positive consequences for long term societal survival.

Positive effects of punishment

Because of aversive control mechanisms we button our coats when the temperature drops and loosen our ties when it rises. It leads us to come in from out of the rain, to blow on our hot coffee before we drink it, and to keep our fingers out of electrical outlets. The presence of aversive control in these cases is clearly advantageous. Likewise, the *absence* of aversive control can be problematic. A dramatic example of this was provided by Scripture (1895) who noted that when a frog was placed in a beaker of water which was then heated at a rate of 0.002°C per second that it “never moved and at the end of two and one half hours was found dead. He had evidently been boiled without noticing it” [sic] (p. 120). Clearly, the absence of aversive control was not in the frog’s long-term best interest.

Skinner (1971) likewise acknowledged that the absence of aversive consequences may have long term deleterious effects for an individual and that positive reinforcement may have negative consequences that occur after a delay: “A problem arises...when the behavior generated by positive reinforcement has deferred aversive consequences. The problem to be solved by those concerned with freedom is to create immediate aversive consequences” (p. 33). Indeed, Skinner (1983) laid down draconian rules for himself so as to limit engaging in certain reinforcing activities such as chess and bridge. Other examples of positive experiences being dangerous specifically because they do not generate avoidance, escape, or their emotional counterparts, even when the contingencies are ultimately detrimental, might include gambling and drug use.

In investigating punishment from a manager’s perspective, Ball, Trevino, and Sims (1994) noted, somewhat unexpectedly, that there was little discussion by managers of problems such as sabotage or workplace violence or other forms of aggression resulting from their use of punishment. Thus, the supposed negative side effects of punishment did not occur. Moreover, the

researchers found that subordinates react more positively to punishment that is perceived to be fair than to punishment perceived to be unfair. Interestingly, it was also found that punishment may be less effective with some individuals than with others because of each person's predisposition to see a punishment event in a particular light. Individuals with a strong belief in a just world (i.e., individuals' general belief that people get the rewards and punishments they deserve, Lerner, 1980) saw punishment as more constructive and as providing them with more control. They also viewed the punishment as less unkind than those with a weak belief in a just world.

Finally, Atwater et al. (1997) found that certain aspects of punishment were related to leader charisma signaling perhaps that leaders who punish poor performers and rule violations engender more respect from others. Indeed, leaders such as David Koresh, General George Patton, and Adolph Hitler are specific examples of charismatic individuals who used significant amounts of punishment as part of their repertoire of leadership techniques. Yet each was viewed by their followers as being highly charismatic. Atwater et al. (1997) speculated that punishment may be related to charisma because it helps establish or clarify the leader's high expectations. This is consistent with other research that found that contingent punishment is associated with reduced role ambiguity (Keller & Szilagyi, 1976) and may help clarify what is expected of employees (Sims & Szilagyi, 1975). These findings suggest that followers, at least to some extent, react positively to the use of contingent punishment behavior by leaders.

Learning from others' punishment—or lack of it

Social learning theorists posit that learning occurs not only from the consequences of one's own actions, but also from information obtained vicariously from observing others (Bandura, 1986). Accordingly, punishment has been studied as a social phenomenon that influences the cognitions, emotions, and actions of the administrator of punishment, as well as those of recipients and observers, defined as "individuals in the relevant social context who take an interest in the punishment of a coworker" (Trevino, 1992, p. 647). Trevino (1992) contended that when considering the implications of punishment, members of the broader social group (e.g., coworkers or observers) and their interpretations of the event must be taken into account.

Because observers have a vested interest in the outcome of punishment, they attend and react to the meaning of the event for them (Trevino & Ball, 1992). As such, observers may react to others' discipline differently than the recipient (Trevino & Ball, 1992). Trevino (1992) argues

that observers' reactions are potentially more important than those of recipients because they represent a greater number of people and those not being disciplined are typically the more committed and productive employees. This enables managers to promote vicarious learning by delivering a message to other members of the work group on what is acceptable behavior and should be avoided (Trevino, 1992).

These social effects of punishment were also identified by O'Reilly and Puffer (1989) who tested the hypothesis that the application of negative or positive sanctions by superiors toward a *deserving* group member would have positive effects on the attitudes and intentions of other group members. Findings showed that the application of a deserved reward or punishment to a group member had positive effects on the expressed motivation, productivity, satisfaction, and perception of equity of observers, while failure to use sanctions had negative effects. The punishment of poor performance registered the highest ratings of equity while inappropriate rewards and punishments led to lower levels of motivation, satisfaction, and perceived fairness.

Just as individuals may learn from others being punished (Manz & Sims, 1981), they may also learn from those who are not punished. Other employees, acting as models, "...facilitate the learning of dysfunctional as well as functional organizational behavior" (Luthans & Kreitner, 1975, p. 130). This statement implies that modeling is a process by which undesirable as well as desirable work behaviors can be learned. Take safety-related behavior, for example. If nothing is said or done to an employee engaging in at-risk behavior and/or violations of safety policies and procedures then it is conceivable that other workers will observe this, and be more inclined to engage in such behavior. Likewise, if an employee steals organizational assets and nothing happens to this worker, then others may perceive, rightly or wrongly, that such behavior is permitted. Daniels (2001), in commenting about supervisors not addressing such activities, has cleverly indicated that by doing nothing, supervisors are doing something. By not punishing such counterproductive behaviors, supervisors are inadvertently teaching employees that such objectionable activity is, if not approved, at least tolerated. Managers who avoid disciplinary situations may be sending a powerful unintended signal to their other subordinates and could be sowing the seeds of discontent.

Learning from negative experiences

Drawing lessons from experience is a major determinant of learning and of achieving improvement in organizational performance (Levitt & March, 1988). There is an imbalance,

however, between learning from failures and learning from successes: lessons from experience after failures are more effective in raising subsequent performance than the process of learning from successes (Ellis, Mendel, & Nir, 2006). Baumeister, Bratslavsky, Finkenauer, and Vohs (2001) have documented that “Bad is stronger than good” and argued that negative events have more impact than positive events, and that information about bad things is processed more thoroughly than information about good. This is consistent with the view that failed or unexpected incidents are a prerequisite for learning that has found widespread expression in the social psychology and organizational behavior literature (Maheswaran & Chaiken, 1991; Pyszczynski & Greenberg, 1987). According to Kolb (1984), unexpected events and failures prompt an inner sense of discomfort and perplexity, which serves as a lever for change and growth. Focusing on failures or calling individuals’ attention to errors, deficits, and problems can offer a solution to the complacency that commonly affects persons following successful performance (Sitkin, 1992). Indeed, Sitkin (1992) even suggested that organizations should develop a strategy of learning from small failures in order to improve their performance.

Thus, there is a negative outcome bias and focusing on employee performance gaps, failures, and weaknesses leads to greater worker motivation to improve task behavior and results rather than spotlighting successes. However, people seldom receive negative feedback about their skills and abilities from others in everyday life (Matlin & Stang, 1978) leading frequently to inflated self-assessments and continued incompetence (Kruger & Dunning, 1999). Even young children are familiar with the notion that “If you do not have something nice to say, don’t say anything at all.” Such discussions, however, do not have to be harsh, unsympathetic, or callous.

Message framing

A number of authors (e.g., Geers, Handley, & McLarney, 2003; Luntz, 2007) have stressed the importance of positive messages in influencing behavior. Such advice, however, may be overstated and must be qualified. A robust literature has demonstrated that the way information is presented or framed (positively or negatively) will differentially influence the responses of individuals to the issue at hand (Kahneman & Tversky, 1979). Messages that are framed positively stress the benefits gained if one accepts a course of action (e.g., “You will reduce your risk of developing lung cancer if you quit smoking”). Negatively framed messages stress the negative consequences incurred if one does not accept such action (e.g., “You will increase your risk of developing lung cancer if you do not quit smoking”). The effectiveness of

message-framing interventions has been examined in a number of health-related areas. For example, Meyerowitz and Chaiken (1987) investigated an intervention designed to increase breast self-examination (BSE) among college women. They found that a pamphlet promoting BSE was more effective (in terms of BSE attitudes, intentions, and behaviors) if it stressed the negative consequences of nonadherence rather than the positive consequences of adherence. Thus, under certain circumstances stressing negative consequences was more effective than emphasizing positive outcomes.

One situation where stressing *negative* consequences is particularly effective is when individuals are highly interested and involved in a particular topic (Rothman & Salovey, 1997). Perhaps owing to the high personal relevance of messages such as reprimands or censures, negatively framed messages should be more effective. As Block and Keller (1995) suggest, there are times when it is appropriate to accentuate the negative—and supervisory reproofs and other disciplinary discussions may be one of those situations because negatively framed messages garner greater attention from the recipient and can produce greater persuasion to comply with management suggestions than positively framed communications.

Summary and Conclusion

With America's "strong positivity zeitgeist" (Norem & Chang, 2002, p. 993), sanctions are frequently not seen as appropriate and imply coercion, restraint, and cruelty. Part of the reason may rest with the non-humanitarian aspects invoked by the thought of punishment as a motivator. There are, however, circumstances where a lack of punishment may cause individuals to learn that it is acceptable to arrive late at work, work at half speed, and/or generate products of slipshod quality. This paper questions the conventional wisdom of not using punishment and suggests that under some circumstances such advice may be problematic and that a more balanced view of supervisory behavior with respect to punishment and discipline is warranted.

Just as in ancient times, Americans generally remain unreceptive to modern Cassandras. One such modern Cassandra may be psychologist Woolfolk who cautions against the indiscriminate endorsement of all things positive. Woolfolk (2002), for example, declared:

I would submit negative thinking is not only valuable, but indispensable and suggest that we give much too little attention to acknowledging, confronting, accepting, and perhaps even embracing suffering and loss.

I want to suggest also that there may be worse things in life than

experiencing negative affect. Among those worse things are ignorance, banality, credulity, self-deception, narcissism, insensitivity, philistinism, and isolation... (p. 20).

Likewise, behavioral researcher Julie Norem, in her classic book, *The Positive Power of Negative Thinking* (2002), showed how indulging in negative thoughts helps certain individuals do their best by preparing them for the worst. Dr. Norem has found that many people perform more poorly when forced to think positive, since negative thinking (referred to as defensive pessimism, a strategy of imagining a worst-case scenario) is effective in managing anxiety.

Similarly, in the professional organizational research literature Fineman (2006b) has expressed concern about what he perceives as the overemphasis on positivity, and political science theorist Dienstag (2006) argued persuasively that optimism is problematic, leading to disillusion and resignation because it sets people up for disappointment while pessimism liberates individuals from the relentless expectation of progress and finds energy in realism about the world. Dienstag (2006) indicated that optimism is dangerous because it often leads people to underestimate the hazards of the world, and that the power of negative thinking is that it enables people to deal with the unexpected.

Ethics and punishment

No discussion of punishment is complete without a discussion of ethics. Here, I will focus on two areas. The first briefly reviews the very practical considerations involving the impact of punishing unethical behavior while the second examines a more general essay addressing societal implications of using punishment and/or not using it.

Punishment of unethical behavior

In unethical behavior situations, the punishment of an offender conveys important symbolic meaning (Blau, 1964) to observers about the value of conformity to ethical norms. Likewise, failure to punish for engaging in unethical behavior often sends a message that unethical conduct is acceptable (Jansen & Von Glinow, 1985; Zey-Ferrell & Ferrell, 1982). Newman and Fuqua (2006) noted that many workers have become emboldened by the example of top executives who have cheated without facing serious negative consequences and now believe that getting ahead in the marketplace permits them to use any means (e.g., cheating, lying, and stealing) at their disposal. Additionally, Trevino and Ball (1992) found that punishing

unethical behavior is not only acceptable to observers, but that relatively harsh punishment seems to be preferred. In this study, harsh punishment had positive outcomes in terms of observers' outcome expectancies, justice evaluations, and emotional responses. The finding that observers may prefer severe discipline, and more severe than those generally given criminals, is also supported by evidence from the criminal justice literature (Cullen, Clark, Cullen, & Mathers, 1985).

Societal considerations in using and not using punishment

One of the many ways that punishment intersects with ethics is in its power to define and prioritize what is important. This is true of both formal punishment, such as when an individual is found guilty of breaking a law, and informal punishment like criticism, shunning, public disgrace, and loss of prestige and status.

The impact of a lack of punishment on our ethical values may be seen across a number of domains. In sports, for example, the New York Yankee fans who cheer admitted steroid-user Jason Giambi because he is hitting home runs are making the statement that they value on-field performance over off-field integrity. The lack of rejection and punishment for drug users contributes to a new ethical order in which chemical enhancements are acceptable (Ethics Scoreboard Society, 2005).

A similar phenomenon occurred when society stopped penalizing celebrities who had children out of wedlock. Some time ago, film star Ingrid Bergman's career was derailed by public outrage over her pregnancy by a man married to someone else. Today celebrities in music, film, and sports routinely have children without the formality of marriage vows and garner no negative reaction from the public or the media. The message communicated is that having children without being married is not "wrong" resulting in soaring numbers of single mothers across the nation's socio-economic spectrum (Ethics Scoreboard Society, 2005) in spite of the fact that children born to unwed mothers causes major societal problems (Hymowitz, 2006). Children of single parents or broken families do poorer in school, get worse jobs, are more likely to live in poverty, and go on to have children out of wedlock. Yet practically no one declares the conduct improper and deserving of punishment through various expressions of societal disapproval. In part, individuals may be reluctant to do so for fear that they may be perceived as intolerant and thus worthy of contempt and ridicule (Sarfati, 2003). In our increasingly

permissive society a religion of tolerance has developed and intolerance is the gravest sin in this pluralistic faith (Schaff, n. d.).

Likewise, the U.S. military has spoken volumes with its adamant refusal to hand out significant punishment to those in the chain of command leading to the prisoner abuse at Iraq's Abu Ghraib prison and elsewhere. With respect to crime, Dierker (2006), a state judge in Missouri, indicated that the culture of leniency fostered by Lyndon Johnson's Great Society (Sowell, 1995) has resulted in substantial social regression such that there has been a 560% increase in violent crime (Bennett, 1999) due significantly to what Dierker (2006) calls the "crime but no punishment" (p. 91) phenomenon. From a slightly different perspective, Pitts (2007) bemoans the fact that "We have reached a pass [point] where one is almost shocked to see people held to answer for scandal and ineptitude. Where one is taken aback at the notion that failure carries a price" (p. A14).

Rimm and Masters (1974) argued persuasively that, ethically speaking, one must also consider the harm that may occur if nothing is done. They suggest that it is more humane to modify self-destructive behavior than to do nothing. One way to influence behavior is through punishment. Indeed, Kidder (2005) points out that "When the punishment fits, the behavior shifts" and the organization is encouraged. While punishment can be seen as vindictive, under certain circumstances it is appropriate and valid.

On a broader social scale, punishment signals to employees and citizens that unethical behavior is wrong and will not be tolerated. Research on ethical conduct has even demonstrated that direct punishment for unethical actions led to more ethical behavior than did rewards for ethical behavior (Trevino, Youngblood, Sutton, & Woodman, 1985). The recent watershed development in which 10 former directors of WorldCom Inc. agreed to pay \$18 million out of their *own* pockets for their failed oversight of the bankrupt telecom firm was a punishment for ethical wrongdoing that may have an impact for years to come (Institute for Global Ethics, 2005). Taking money from a director's personal assets was an unusual arrangement since most companies carry insurance designed to insulate directors from taking a personal loss when sued for wrongdoing. Step by step, case by case, decision by decision, America's culture of acceptable and unacceptable behavior is constantly evolving according to the conduct we are willing to tolerate. Without punishment, ethical distinctions will blur into incoherence. Whether we like it or not, levels of punishment (and rewards) send a message and defines our culture.

Cautions

On the other hand, the recommendations on the productive use of aversive control should not be interpreted as implying that managers should become sadistic, blissfully punishing every undesired behavior. This article is not intended to promote indiscriminate and unskilled use of punishment procedures with humans but simply to question conventional wisdom that it should be altogether avoided. The article does suggest, however, that punishment can be an effective tool for correcting employee misbehavior when used appropriately. As Arvey and Jones (1985) indicated, "A good manager is not necessarily one who seldom or never disciplines employees, but is rather one who administers discipline in a constructive or 'fair' manner" (p. 383).

Managers should use positive reinforcement and positive expectations all tailored to the individual employee. In many cases we can deal more constructively with problem behaviors by studying them, removing the rewards that support them, and rewarding related behaviors that are desirable. The goal should be to take constructive action to correct these behaviors and not to demoralize and psychologically paralyze others by dwelling on them. Nevertheless, non-positive or aversive strategies may be useful at certain times, with certain people, in certain contexts. There are occasions when, if we care for a person, we must do something to stop behavior that is detrimental to that person. Not doing something to stop inappropriate behavior is a way of saying, "I don't care about your long-term happiness." There are occasions when letting employees experience the negative consequences of their behavior is the best thing a supervisor can do to support their long term adjustment. However, if managers find themselves using aversive consequences more and more, then they are almost certainly in a counterproductive situation (Daniels, 2001). Furthermore, as Johnston (1972) suggested, it seems as irrelevant to consider the question of whether or not punishment should be used with humans as it is to ask whether or not reinforcing stimuli should be used. It appears impossible to eliminate the use of punishment with humans.

The current positivity *weltanschauung* leads to an overemphasis on the merits of being positive with a corresponding under-emphasis on its potential costs. Such a myopic view may blind supervisors to the diversity of approaches and pathways that can be used to better the human condition. One approach offered in this paper is punishment and managers would be advised to consider using both (contingent) rewards and punishments.

This may be particularly important for new supervisors. Even for the most talented individuals, the process of moving from individual contributors to first-time supervisors is a difficult journey. The transition is frequently more difficult than it has to be because new managers often behave based on myths about the supervisory role (Hill, 2007). One such misconception involves the belief that supervisors must be positive. For years managers have been taught to be positive rather than negative because negative sanctions are not seen as desirable. Human relations and human resource approaches to management generally assume, either implicitly or explicitly, a human potential or growth-oriented perspective with an emphasis on being optimistic, encouraging, and positive. But punishment is a part of all supervisory positions and it should not be quickly dismissed as contrary to good management.

There will be readers, however, who will quickly discount the research cited herein because it flies in the face of conventional wisdom. Tavis and Aronson (2007) noted that “when people are forced to look at disconfirming evidence, they will find a way to criticize, distort, or dismiss it so that they can maintain or even strengthen their existing belief” (p. 18). Even reading information that goes against an individual’s point of view can make them all the more convinced they are right (Lord, Ross, & Lepper, 1979). Believing is seeing for many of us! Nevertheless, it is hoped that this manuscript can provide some food for thought and may help (particularly new) supervisors become more effective leaders.

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Footnotes

¹ Renowned economist John Kenneth Galbraith coined the phrase conventional wisdom: "...We associate truth with convenience, with what most closely accords with self-interest and personal well-being or promises best to avoid awkward effort or unwelcome dislocation of life. We also find highly acceptable what contributes most to self-esteem." Economic and social behavior, Galbraith continued, "are complex, and to comprehend their character is mentally tiring. Therefore we adhere, as though to a raft, to those ideas which represent our understanding" (Galbraith, 1958, p. 26).

² A stimulus is aversive if its contingent removal, withdrawal, prevention, or postponement maintains behavior (i.e., negative reinforcement) or if its contingent presentation suppresses behavior or reduces the future probability of that behavior (i.e., punishment; Azrin & Holz, 1966; Perone, 2003). It should be noted that there is neither stated nor intended any implication that the consequent stimulus must be in any way painful to the individual. Examples of organizational punishing behavior include oral reprimands, written reprimands, probation, suspensions, demotions, or termination for some action deemed unacceptable by management (i.e., formal rule violation) intended to reduce or eliminate an undesirable employee behavior or to correct the failure to perform appropriate task behaviors. The terms aversive control, punishment, and discipline are used interchangeably in this paper.

³ Such a view was expressed by a colleague who reviewed an earlier draft of this manuscript. The professor's first comment concerned why the author was addressing a topic that had been so thoroughly researched years ago with the evidence overwhelmingly indicating that punishment should be avoided. The scholar admitted that he did not even read the paper but simply scanned the list of references and quickly concluded that the manuscript had little merit. The author believes this reviewer nicely illustrates a confirmation bias (Nickerson, 1998), a type of selective thinking in which a person tends to notice and to look for what confirms his or her beliefs, and to ignore, not look for, or undervalue the relevance of what contradicts their beliefs. According to Levitt and Dubner (2005), this error characterizes many experts who do not "so much argue the various sides of an issue as plants his flag firmly on one side" (p. 148).

⁴ Positive reinforcers are something like rewards, or things individuals will generally work to get. However, the definition of a positive reinforcement is more precise than that of reward. Specifically, positive reinforcement can be said to have occurred when three conditions have been met: 1) a consequence is presented dependent on a behavior; 2) the behavior becomes more likely to occur; and 3) the behavior becomes more likely to occur because and only because the consequence is presented dependent on the behavior (Luthans & Kreitner, 1975). For ease of discussion, however, the terms positive reinforcer and reward will be used interchangeably in this paper.