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The Mathis Group's

# Messenger

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## Change the Behavior and the Attitude Will Follow



By Dr. Keith Mathis

People have debated for years whether attitude impacts behavior or behavior impacts attitude. Regardless of which comes first, changing one will eventually affect the other. If we help employees change enough of their behaviors, their attitudes will be changed over time. This shift is often gradual due in part to the need to overcome our own comfort zones and the habits we inevitably create.

In order to help people make these changes, we must be prepared to make the highest level of impact.

It is always easier not to prepare than to force yourself through the rigors of preparation. When I decided to begin running long distances, I discovered that getting started is the toughest part. It is always easier to roll over and go back to sleep, especially before the sun comes up or on a Saturday, than it is to rise and go out into the freezing cold and begin your long run. The greatest enemy of preparation is procrastination (Noe, J., Peak Performance Principles for High Achievers, 1984, Berkley, p. 79).

You can help the employee change by providing a series of action steps and by giving praise for any forward progress.

### Structure the changes in a series of steps.

Remember that we desire lasting changes, not just temporary changes that disappear after a few weeks. To achieve this, we must help employees anchor the changes in a new mental state. Such anchoring of a new mental habit requires time and patience. Usually it is achieved only after a considerable number of failures.

Even then we have no guarantee the change in the other person will be permanent. The employee can always choose his or her response to any given situation and return to his or her former habits.

Charles Swindoll, in his book, Strengthening Your Grip writes,

Words can never adequately convey the incredible impact of our attitude toward life. The longer I live the more convinced I become that life is 10 percent what happens to us and 90 percent how we respond to it. I believe the single most significant decision I can make on a day-to-day basis is my choice of attitude. It is more important than my past, my education, my bankroll, my successes or failures, fame or pain, what other people think of me or say about me, my circumstances, or my position. Attitude keeps me going or cripples my progress (Swindoll, C., Strengthening Your Grip, 4).

### Praise is free but not cheap.

Praise costs us nothing but time and initiative. Yet, when sincerely and appropriately used, it can be one of the most appreciated and significant means of promoting and reinforcing change in others.

### Praise encourages the worker to stay motivated.

Praise reassures the employee that you noticed him or her. Many supervisors see the good that employees are doing, and they even tell others, but they forget to say anything to the employee.

Researchers in organizational behavior have long recognized the importance of what is called the Pygmalion Effect. The Pygmalion Effect refers to enhanced learning or performance that results from others having positive expectations of us. The fact that others believe we are capable of high levels of

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*Everybody is in favor of progress.  
It's the change they don't like.  
E.C. McKenzie*

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performance may lead us to perform at that level (Gibson, Ivancevich, Donnelly, 1997, p. 149).

We must be careful not to call attention to bad performance without say something positive about the praiseworthy work an employee has done. When we constantly point out the bad without praising the good, the employee will think we did not notice it. If we characteristically overlook the good and focus our comments on the negative, the employee is likely to stop moving in the direction of the positive behavior and to become anchored in a present state of performance.

Many employees will do whatever it takes to be noticed. If they can gain attention no other way, workers may purposely act out so the leadership will notice them. If positive behavior gets them noticed, that is a wonderful thing. It is another reason for you to praise good work.

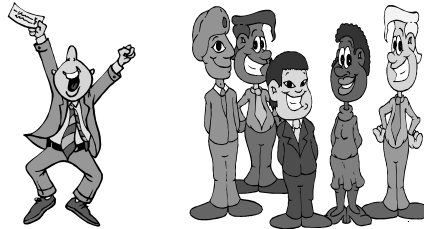
## **Praise is stimulating to self-esteem.**

When we give sincere praise, we are investing in the self-esteem of others by building them up psychologically. The building up of others in this way is one of the most helpful steps we can take in equipping our people for future positions of leadership. If we tear people down, we are reducing their chance for success as leaders. David Burns in his book, Feeling Good, discusses the importance of self-esteem. He writes,

Almost all negative emotional reactions inflict their damage only as a result of low self-esteem. A poor self-image is the magnifying glass that can transform a trivial mistake or an imperfection into an overwhelming symbol of personal defeat (Burns, D., Feeling Good 1980, p. 51).

Think for a moment about the parent who tells her child that he is the most stupid youngster she has ever known. She says she is embarrassed to be seen with the child. What do you suppose is the impact of these messages over time? What will these statements produce in the youngster?

Picture the power of the words in the life of a child. The youngster is wounded and hurting inside. He has a poor self-esteem and no personal confidence. He will look outside himself for validation from others. In doing this, the child may become involved with the wrong kind of friends. When people are hurting inside, they will go in the direction of those people who give them time and respect. Sometimes this direction will defy the authorities.



## **Praise reinforces the desired behavior.**

You may have heard you can attract more flies to honey than you can to vinegar. Praise reinforces the direction of positive change by giving honey when employees are doing things right. This is a form of classic behavior modification. Give positive reinforcement when people are performing in a correct manner and negative reinforcement when they are performing in a negative or incorrect manner. Praising the good behavior allows the employee to keep score and know that things are going well. Let me state it again; we *must* encourage the desired behavior as well as praise the person for the success he or she achieves along the road to change.

Unless we build an individual's self-esteem through praise, we will not anchor his or her new behavior, and the person will probably return to old habits. Remember a clean pig is still a pig inside and will return to the mud hole. A change must take place within the individual if lasting change is to occur on the outside.



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