

# WHAT IS THE REINFORCEMENT THEORY OF MOTIVATION?

American psychologist Burrhus Frederic Skinner or B.F. Skinner was best known for his ground-breaking theories on behavior. Along with his associates, Skinner proposed the Reinforcement Theory of Motivation. It states that behavior is a function of its consequences—an individual will repeat behavior that led to positive consequences and avoid behavior that has had negative effects. This phenomenon is also known as the ‘law effect’.

The Reinforcement Theory ignores an individual’s internal motivations and focuses on environmental factors instead. This is why many organizations dedicate their time and effort to improve the workplace culture. A healthy work environment has the power to motivate employees and boost their morale. In many ways, the Reinforcement Theory becomes a tool for influencing individual behavior.

## TYPES OF REINFORCEMENT IN ORGANIZATIONAL BEHAVIOR

Managers shoulder the additional responsibility of motivating and inspiring their teams to perform better. This is possible only when employees are willing to make changes. Reinforcement is an effective way to guide employees and help them differentiate between positive and negative behaviors. Here are some Reinforcement Theory examples:

### 1. POSITIVE REINFORCEMENT

You positively react to someone’s behavior because it benefits your team and the organization. This also assures the individual to repeat their behavior and continue producing desirable outcomes. For example, you can reward an employee for reaching office early. It increases the probability of the behavior getting repeated. However, your reward needs to be spontaneous for greater reinforcement value.

### 2. NEGATIVE REINFORCEMENT

Negative reinforcement refers to removing obstacles so that others can respond positively and perform the way that they’re expected to. For instance, if someone from your team wraps up early because of a long commute back home, you can ask them to take some projects home and allow them some flexibility.

### 3. PUNISHMENT REINFORCEMENT

In this type of reinforcement, you impose a negative consequence or remove positive consequences to prevent someone from repeating undesirable behaviors. However, punishment doesn’t mean that you reprimand someone or criticize them harshly. For example, suspending an employee for violating work rules. Punishment should not be confused with negative reinforcement, where you withhold negative consequences to

encourage good behavior. The ultimate goal of punishment is to discourage bad behavior.

#### 4. EXTINCTION REINFORCEMENT

It refers to the absence of reinforcements often used by managers to stop learned behavior. You withhold positive reinforcements or rewards that encouraged the behavior in the first place. For example, your team is required to work on an important project. Everyone has to work overtime and even spare their weekends. You provide them overtime pay for their efforts. After the completion of the project, you stop providing any incentives and soon this learned behavior of working overtime ends. However, you need to be careful about how you use this reinforcement because the employees' morale shouldn't get affected.

## USING THE REINFORCEMENT THEORY IN THE WORKPLACE

For the successful implementation of the Reinforcement Theory, you need to incorporate both positive and negative reinforcement. There are two ways in which you can effectively implement the Reinforcement Theory.

#### 1. CONTINUOUS REINFORCEMENT:

You reinforce someone's actions every time they demonstrate desirable behavior.

#### 2. INTERMITTENT REINFORCEMENT:

There will be times when you can't spontaneously reward or punish someone's behavior. Organizations often follow schedules to offer reinforcement and they do it in three ways:

- *Fixed Interval Schedule:*

There is a fixed time period for reinforcement (for example, biweekly paycheck)

- *Variable Interval Schedule:*

There is no fixed schedule for reinforcement and you can motivate someone whenever you think it's suitable

- *Variable Ratio Schedule:*

You reinforce someone's behavior only after they have achieved the predetermined sets of outcomes (for example, giving a raise after someone meets all the targets)