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BEYOND POSITIVE REINFORCEMENT:
OBM AS A HUMANIZING APPROACH TO MANAGEMENT PRACTICES

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Abstract

This article comments on the need to recognize that OBM already is a “positive psychology” for many more reasons than just that it embraces positive reinforce as a cornerstone of workplace improvement. This paper suggests there are at least 10 ways in which OBM constitutes a distinctly “positive” and humanizing approach to management practices. These ways are enumerated and briefly reviewed.

Key words: OBM, positive reinforcement, Positive Psychology, humanizing, humane

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“By expanding the content of OBM and applied behavior analysis, we can learn from other disciplines, make contributions of our own, and bolster others’ understanding of the difference between positive and negative reinforcement. By fulfilling this vision, perhaps positive reinforcement can begin to gain the recognition it deserves in this Decade of Behavior and in the development of a positive psychology sub-discipline” (Wiegand & Geller, this issue, p. xx).

This quote highlights the emphasis these authors have placed on the importance of positive reinforcement as a cornerstone of an emerging “positive psychology” in the workplace. The point of this paper is not to disagree with this characterization of reinforcement, but rather to augment it by suggesting that OBM already is a “positive psychology” for many more reasons than just that it embraces this one key principle. Indeed, there are at least 10 ways in which OBM constitutes a distinctly humanizing approach to management practices.

Workplace Performers: Commodities or Investments?

As a context for discussing these 10 ways, let’s first consider some contrasting views of the workplace. Throughout this discussion, we will use the term “performers” to refer to anyone within an organization with job responsibilities, whether they are part of the management hierarchy or line employees. According to Webster’s revised unabridged dictionary, to “humanize” something is to soften it, or make it gentle by overcoming “cruel dispositions and rude habits,” or to refine or civilize it. In terms of the workplace, “cruel dispositions and rude habits” certainly could be apt descriptors for various ways in which performers can be viewed and/or treated by their organizations. Civilizing performer treatment really means adopting management and supervisory styles that are inherently respectful of each and every individual person. Such respect carries with it a unique view of the human resource as an asset worthy of significant care and investment, rather than merely being a commodity or tool.

From the latter perspective, performers are regarded as cogs in a larger organizational wheel. As such, they are hired (presumably with the needed talents and abilities) to perform a necessary function and they are subject to replacement or “repair” when this function is no longer discharged in an effective or efficient manner. What usually matters most to organizations with a commodity perspective is the bottom line: Maximizing gains while minimizing costs. As commodities, the worth of performers is determined mainly by the work products they deliver. Training and development activities are viewed as necessary evils sometimes required to ensure operating efficiency, much as lubrication is needed to reduce friction and wear among moving parts. This organizational perspective often leads to what I have described elsewhere as “the results trap” (Crowell, 1998), wherein management is at a loss to understand or to remedy situations in which their commodities fail to perform as desired. Failure is hidden somewhere inside the performer. The outcome can be a work environment dominated by threat or punishment.

Alternatively, performers can be viewed by their companies as assets rather than cogs. This perspective leads to an emphasis on the care and development of people and implies certain clear organizational responsibilities for providing the necessary investment resources and support functions to accomplish these goals. Training and development is therefore regarded as a way of life, not a necessary evil, and results are not the only measure of a performer’s worth. Failure may lie within the organization’s practices, not inevitably within the performer.

Given a choice, most reasonable people, and certainly most performers, would opt to work within an organization that held an asset rather than commodity perspective of their people. Such a perspective likely would go a long way toward helping to create a positive environment in which the quality of work life would be enhanced for each and every performer, or as

Wiegand and Geller (this issue, p. xx) have described it, an environment “in which productivity and quality are high and workers are generally satisfied, happy, healthy, and safe.” Wiegand and Geller (this issue, p. xx) suggest that creating such an enhanced work environment should be “a major focus of OBM.”

Ten Ways OBM Already is a “Positive” Approach to Workplace Enhancement

In the context of this special issue, it seems appropriate to remind readers that there are a variety of ways in which OBM already has pioneered in its own brand of “positive” (as in “desirable,” see Hineline, this issue) psychology. The purpose of this section is briefly to describe just 10 “positive” dimensions of OBM that, from our perspective, have been part and parcel of its approach to workplace enhancement. Some reflection on this list reveals there is far more about OBM that is “humane” and civilized than just its emphasis on positive reinforcement.

The reader will note that what follows may seem to depart somewhat from conventional ways of describing OBM approaches to workplace enhancement. This departure is intentional and, notwithstanding the cautionary note offered by Hineline (this issue) regarding use of the vernacular, is a reflection of what we and others (Bailey, 1991; Brown, 2000) see as a pressing need from a marketing perspective to couch OBM procedures and outcomes more in the language of its consumers than in the technical parlance of its researchers and practitioners.

1. OBM is development oriented.

There can be little doubt that from its inception OBM has been devoted to increasing global measures of organizational effectiveness by enhancing the capabilities of individual performers whose collective efforts fashion it (Crowell, 1998; Crowell & Anderson, 1982a,

1982b; Hall, 1980). While a variety of performance improvement interventions have been deployed for this purpose, all are used in the service of achieving increased personal success. The commitment inherent in OBM to improving rather than replacing performers clearly marks it as a development-oriented discipline, not just a utilitarian way to achieve better bottom-line results.

2. OBM objectifies the performance development process.

Historically, OBM approaches have focused on performer behavior rather than attitudes or other internal states (Crowell & Anderson, 1982a; Daniels, 1989). This characteristic of OBM objectifies the management process, thereby reducing the kinds of arguments and differences of opinion that can arise when emphasis is placed on unobservable, inner traits or states. Such arguments stem from the obvious fact that while it is possible for others to witness performer words and actions, the same cannot be said for personal attitudes, motivations, goals, talents, or knowledge. Clearly, internal states are accessible, if at all, only to those who actually possess them.

Thus, when management feels compelled to focus on inner states, as they often do, two things can happen and both of them usually are not productive. First, management-performer interactions can become personal from an employee's perspective. When a performer's attitudes or motives are questioned, it can be like questioning his or her heritage or character—it smacks of personal defect, of which no one likes to be accused. The emotionality that can arise within the performer from what is perceived to be a personal attack can interfere with productive conversation and further development. In other “performance” contexts, we have called these “competing responses” (Anderson, Crowell, Cunningham, & Lupo, 1979).

A second likely consequence of focusing on the inner person will be disagreement arising from a lack of a common understanding or definition of the purported internal conditions. Performers well may not concur with the characterization that they have, for example, a “bad” attitude, or even one in need of improvement. This, too, will interfere with productive conversation between managers and their performers as well as with subsequent developmental actions. The focus within OBM on overt behavior as the means to achieve increased personal success circumvents much of this unproductive emotionality and argument.

3. OBM acknowledges individual differences.

Certainly, a part of what it means to respect the dignity and worth of individual performers is to acknowledge that important interpersonal differences can and do exist. Moreover, these differences may well have implications for how behavior can be understood in specific situations (Harzem, 1984) and how, therefore, performance improvement best can be achieved in any particular case. For example, it has long been known that what serves as a reinforcer for one person may not for another. That reinforcement is subject to such interpersonal variation is implied by the functional definition of “reinforcer” that has been inherent in behavior analytic approach. This is but one way in which the Behavior Analysis movement, in general, and OBM, in particular, acknowledges, respects, and indeed expects individual differences.

4. OBM bases accountability on personal control.

As we and others noted some years ago (Crowell & Anderson, 1982b; Daniels, 1989), OBM practices are rooted in a notion of accountability based on personal control. According to this notion, performers should be held responsible only for actions/outcomes over which they have a large (preferably a full) measure of personal control. Otherwise, when performers are

expected to produce results over which they have little or no influence, an inherently unfair work situation is created. Unfair and unrealistic expectations of this sort do little to foster organizational success, and certainly don't help the cause of performer development (Crowell, 1998).

5. OBM places emphasis on defining and clarifying the job.

OBM is appropriately focused on the means (i.e., behaviors) by which ends (i.e., valued results) are achieved. This focus helps to ensure that jobs are defined carefully in terms of what behaviors are necessary to produce desired accomplishments. Moreover, OBM methods include ways of clarifying these requirements for performers so they are not in the dark about what they need to do or what is expected of them (Anderson, Crowell, Hantula, & Siroky, 1988; Crowell, Anderson, Abel, & Sergio, 1988). In an informed and clarified work environment of this sort, performers are not apt to fall victim to the common but unfair mentality of “I don't care how you do it, just get me the results.”

6. OBM enhances personal awareness of behavior and outcomes.

A truism of change is that I can't know where I'm going if I don't know where I am. OBM uses feedback as a kind of “mirror” to bring people in closer contact with their behavior and its consequences, priming the behavior-change pump, so to speak. Feedback, along with job definition and clarification, are the first critical steps toward enabling performers to take control of their own personal processes of change (Watson & Tharp, 2002).

7. OBM uses goals to shape and refine personal success.

OBM long has recognized that goal-setting is one important way to operationalize the shaping process so as to achieve incremental improvement and avoid the unfair but frequent practice of asking for too much change in too little time (Daniels, 1989). In addition, goals can

aid in the job clarification process and are another important means of recognizing individual differences.

8. OBM manages by appreciation rather than exception.

Many work environments are largely devoid of recognition because of the prevailing assumption that performers already are paid to do a job right. Instead, implicit avoidance contingencies may operate in these situations characterized in the performer's view by the notion that the reward for a job done well is not getting "called onto the carpet" (Luthans & Kreitner, 1975). These circumstances may be described as a form of "management by exception" in which mistakes or poor performances are the only events to which management attention is called.

Steadfastly, OBM has represented an opposite case of "management by recognition" in which the basic idea is to "catch the performer doing something right" and then celebrate it in some way or another. As Luthans and Kreitner (1975) and Daniels (1989) have noted, whereas management by exception tends to increase affective or behavioral responses competitive with desired performance (e.g., anger, frustration, avoidance, aggression), managing by appreciation may enhance responses that are compatible with, or even facilitative of, what is desired (e.g., persistence, satisfaction, cooperation).

9. OBM encourages personal bests rather than best persons.

Another hallmark of OBM, from our perspective, has been its traditional emphasis on intra-personal rather than inter-personal competition. By arranging feedback, goals and recognition systems so that all performers can "win" by doing better tomorrow than today, a more equitable workplace atmosphere is created, one not characterized by the zero-sum game of

“winner take all” (Crowell & Anderson, 1982b). Instead, performers can be recognized in accord with their goals and performance histories.

10. OBM fosters self management.

Perhaps the epitome of humane treatment and civility in the workplace is to offer performers the circumstances and tools with which they can control their own development and, thereby, their own destiny (Geller, 2002). Through the collective effects of the various points of emphasis and procedures described above, OBM makes important strides toward this goal. Through its job clarification and individualized improvement strategies, along with the enhanced awareness of performance and outcomes it help performers to develop, personal control over the behavior change process is facilitated. As a consequence, performers are more likely to achieve higher levels of self regulation and self management than might otherwise be obtained.

Conclusion

In sum, these 10 attributes of OBM, along with others not highlighted here, have elevated the dignity and value of each and every performer to a level of central importance in the performance improvement effort. Rather than being cogs in a profit-oriented organizational machine, performers from an OBM perspective are precious assets of an organization worthy of significant investment and care (see Crowell, 1998). While positive reinforcement is a fundamental cornerstone of this care, by no means does it stand alone as the singular principle of humane and civil treatment inherent in OBM.

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