

## Leadership Barometer 186 Ubiquitous Reinforcement Robert T. Whipple, MBA CPTD



**Ubiquitous reinforcement** should occur at all levels.

You can never overdo sincere reinforcement in an organization. The best reinforcement approach is to make it ubiquitous and continuous. The word ubiquitous comes from the Latin root, ubique, which means

everywhere.

### Reinforcement is intrinsic

When people are properly reinforced, they develop habits of doing the right things because it makes them feel good. The reinforcement becomes intrinsic. People are doing their best at all times, not just when the boss has a chance to witness it.

Of all the tools at a leader's command, positive reinforcement is by far the most powerful. Reinforcement can be a minefield of potential problems, and many leaders, after getting burned, become reluctant to use it. By avoiding reinforcement, they ignore the most powerful correcting force available to them.

### Typical reinforcement mistakes

It is sad that many attempts at positive reinforcement actually lower motivation. You have probably experienced this yourself, either on the sending or receiving end, and it can be very frustrating. There are four reasons why positive reinforcement can have a negative impact.

1. **Overdone Tangible Reinforcement** – The overuse of trinkets, buttons, T-shirts, or stickers to reinforce every positive action gets old quickly.
2. **Insincere Reinforcing** – Insincerity is transparent. When a manager says nice things about you that do not come from the heart, you know it instantly.
3. **Not Perceived as Reinforcing** - What people find reinforcing is a matter of individual taste.

**4. Reinforcement Perceived as Unfair** - Of all the reasons for not reinforcing well, the issue of fairness is the most common. If they reinforce Sally publicly, it makes her feel good but tends to turn off Joe and Mark, who believe they did more than she did.

That dynamic is why the “employee of the month” concept often backfires. It sets up a kind of implied competition where one person is singled out for attention. One person wins while everyone else loses.

### **Ubiquitous reinforcement**

If reinforcement occurs at all levels, then the culture will thrive. That culture is a social norm that encourages everyone to honestly appreciate each other and say so as often as possible.

As a leader, you want to develop this kind of atmosphere, but how? A good place to start is with yourself. Make sure you are practicing positive reinforcement in a way that others see and recognize. Create an atmosphere where everyone understands and places high value on effective reinforcement.

### **Transform the culture**

A reinforcing culture transforms an organization from a “what’s wrong” mindset to one of “what’s right.” The quality and quantity of work increase dramatically because you have harnessed energy previously lost in bickering. You put it into positive work toward the vision. What an uplifting way to increase productivity!

Don’t get discouraged if you make a mistake in reinforcing. Sometimes you will. It is an area of significant peril, but its power is immense. Continually monitor your success level with reinforcement. Talk about it openly, and work to improve the culture. Consider every mistake a learning event for everyone, especially yourself.

### **Conclusion**

Let your reinforcement be joyous and spontaneous. Let people help you make it special. Reinforcement is the most powerful elixir available to a leader. Don’t shy away from it because it’s difficult or you’ve made mistakes in the past.

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