

Reinforcement: How to Unfreeze Old Behaviors and Re-freeze the New

Posted by Paula Alsher

Don Harrison, developer of the AIM Change Management Methodology tells our AIM Accreditation participants their organizations are perfectly designed. As you can imagine, he sees a lot of shocked faces when he says this. But, here's his point... your organization is perfectly designed for the results you are achieving right now.

The over-riding principle is simple. Every time you see a behavior, there either is or was a reward for it. So, for example, if your leaders are exhibiting "turf-guarding" somehow, somehow they are being reinforced for protecting their territory. People are promoted into leadership positions as a recognition of their skills and accomplishments. If turf-guarding is what got them there, you better believe they are going to continue to do it.

So, when it comes to implementing an organizational change the question becomes how do you unfreeze the current behaviors and re-freeze the new behaviors you seek to see?

Reinforcement is the Power Lever

The answer is actually quite easy. The only way to change behavior is to change the Reinforcements. If you don't change the Reinforcements, you will just get more of the same behavior.

When we talk about Reinforcement, we are referring to the following three ways that the new behaviors (the ones we seek to see) are encouraged:

- Positive consequences are given for desired behavior
- Negative consequences are given for failing to change
- Making adoption of the new behaviors easier, while making the old ways harder

So, what does it take to actually change behavior and have people move from the gravitational pull of the status quo? Here are three steps to follow:

- Decrease rewards for old; increase rewards for new
- Increase negative consequences for old; decrease consequences for new
- Increase the level of effort for the old; decrease the level of effort for the new

But keep in mind you need to build in many more positive rewards than negative consequences to drive the migration of new behaviors. In fact, research has shown that there is a 4:1 ratio between positive and negative Reinforcement. This means, it takes four positive Reinforcement events to equal just one negative.

Retrieved from: <http://www.imaworldwide.com/blog/reinforcement-how-to-unfreeze-old-behaviors-and-re-freeze-the-new>

What to Use as Reinforcement

One of the most common questions we get from Change Agents as well as Sponsors, is what they should use to Reinforce the new behaviors. The first piece of advice we always give is all Reinforcements need to be from the Frame of Reference of the individual. In other words, the Reinforcement must have meaning or value for the individual or group you are trying to motivate.

Not sure what that is? Then, you need to ask! AIM's Targeted Reinforcement Tool can help your Sponsors and Change Agents identify which specific rewards will be meaningful for the Targets of your change. This tool is designed to promote open and frank discussion about Reinforcement between the manager and his or her direct report.

Sometimes the results of a Targeted Reinforcement Analysis can be pretty surprising! In one organization, the most significant Reinforcement turned out to be the opportunity to select some logo merchandise. In another, it was having photos of the best performers displayed on the walls of the company headquarters. In a third, it was getting a personal hand-written note from a supervisor with a favorite candy bar attached to it. In comparison to the investment these organizations were spending on their actual change initiatives, these costs were quite minimal. But... each one was powerful and from the Frame of Reference of the recipient. Whatever works has always been our motto!

One thing to keep in mind, though, is Reinforcements must be applied as soon as possible following the behavior, and they must be directly connected to that behavior. This is why you cannot limit Reinforcements to your formal performance appraisal system. The timing is just too infrequent.

Developing a Reinforcement Strategy

It is easy to understand why one of the key elements of the Accelerating Implementation Methodology (AIM) change management framework is to "Develop a Reinforcement Strategy" for your project. The more significant your change, such as transformation, the more important it becomes to develop implementation-specific rewards and consequences. But remember, Reinforcement management is less about the formal compensation and performance management systems and much more about the daily interaction between a Sponsor and his or her direct reports.

If your organization is implementing a change, don't become frozen in the status quo. Applying a sound Reinforcement strategy will help to ensure you are unfreezing the old behaviors and re-freezing the new.