

Knowledge Worker

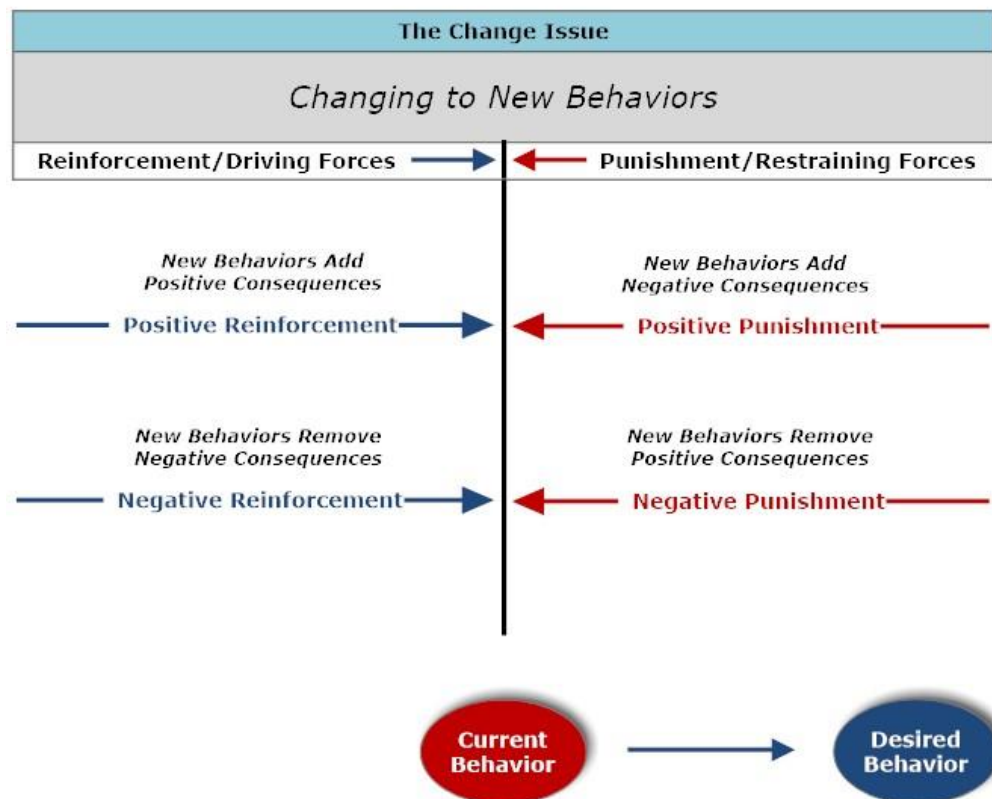
Kurt Lewin meets B. F. Skinner

(June 2016)

The Navy trained me as a classroom instructor, a writer of programmed instructional materials and an instructional systems specialist. It also trained me as an internal organization development (OD) consultant. I put all that training to good use, especially when I was part of the Navy's Human Resources Management Project, where my blend of instructional technology and organization development proved very valuable in the design and delivery of a large-scale, organization-wide intervention known as the Command Action Planning System (CAPS).

Human Performance Technology, OD and Instructional Technology are all change oriented and I have long been an advocate for collaboration between and among the practitioners of these change-oriented disciplines. In this month's column I'll lay out one small piece of the larger foundation on which such collaboration might rest. It integrates Kurt Lewin's Force-Field Analysis and B. F. Skinner's Reinforcement Theory. The diagram in Figure 1 below provides our starting point.

Kurt Lewin meets B.F. Skinner



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Figure 1 – Force-Field Analysis and Reinforcement Theory

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Force-Field Analysis is an outgrowth of Kurt Lewin’s Force-Field Theory (see Lippitt, 1973). It asserts, among other things, that most stable situations are profitably viewed as existing in a field of forces whose effects are such that a homeostatic balance exists. Some of these forces can be viewed as “driving forces” and some can be viewed as “restraining forces.” They tend to offset or balance one another and thus a form of dynamic stability exists. Lewin’s theory also suggests that in order to effect change, the balance of these forces must be altered. It cautions against simply increasing the driving forces (because there will be push-back or offsetting increases in the restraining forces and that push-back can lead to a vicious cycle that serves no purpose except to heighten tensions). The preferred strategy is one of reducing or eliminating various restraining forces. Instead of attempting to overwhelm the opposing forces, you focus on undercutting them.

Reinforcement theory, per B. F. Skinner, suggests that behavior is shaped by its consequences. Skinner (1965) defined positive reinforcement as adding a positive consequence, and negative reinforcement as removing a negative consequence (p.73). He also defined two forms of punishment: (1) positive punishment – adding a negative consequence and (2) negative punishment – taking away a positive consequence (p.185).

As the diagram above shows, Skinner’s four kinds of consequences fit neatly into the force-field analysis framework. Doing so suggests some basic strategies when attempting to change peoples’ behavior. But doing so has to take into account whether you’re dealing with problems of omission (people aren’t doing what they should be doing) or problems of commission (people are doing things they shouldn’t be doing). These call for different strategies; indeed, they are the mirror-image of one another (see Table 1 below).

TABLE1: CHANGE STRATEGIES BY PROBLEM TYPE

Type of Problem	Type of Change	Required Impact on Driving Forces	Required Impact on Restraining Forces
Omission	Start	Increase	Decrease
Commission	Stop	Decrease	Increase

Because the anticipated driving and restraining forces exist only in the minds and imaginations of those whose behavior has been targeted for change, it is extremely difficult for others to independently manipulate these driving and restraining forces. Instead, would-be change agents, whether OD practitioners, instructional technologists or performance improvement specialists, must deal with the perceptions and expectations of the people whose behavior is the target of change.

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Are there additional links between and among HPT, OD and Instructional Technology? Of course, there are. Consider, for example, systems theory in all its many incarnations, including so-called “hard” and “soft” systems. Even training is common ground for all three disciplines. There are more; especially between HPT and OD. So I will continue to pursue and call for collaboration between and among the various practitioners. I hope you will give it some thought, too.

Afterword

This month’s column draws on an article I published in *Performance & Instruction* many years ago. It was titled “Changing Behavior” and I used the pen name Peter W. Taylor. The late Joe Harless was so enamored of its integration of reinforcement theory and force field analysis that he wrote the non-existent Peter Taylor a nice, complimentary note. I probably should have published it under my own name. Those who are interested can find an updated version of it at www.nickols.us/changing.pdf.

References

1. Lippitt, G.L. (1973). *Visualizing change*. Fairfax: NTL Learning Resources Corporation.
2. Nickols, F.W. (Oct 1993). “Changing Behavior.” *Performance & Instruction*, Vol 32, No 9, pp 1-5. NSPI: Washington, D.C.
3. Skinner, B.F. (1965). *Science and human behavior*. New York: Free Press.

About the Author

Fred Nickols, CPT, is a knowledge worker, a writer, consultant and former executive who spent 20 years in the United States Navy, retiring as a decorated chief petty officer. In the private sector, he worked as a consultant and then held executive positions with two former clients. Currently, Fred is the managing partner of Distance Consulting LLC. His website is home to the award-winning Knowledge Workers' Tool Room and more than 200 free articles, book chapters, and papers. Fred is a longtime member of ISPI and writes this monthly column for *PerformanceXpress*.