CHANGING BEHAVIOR, LETTING IT BE—OR MAYBE MAKING IT WORSE
Ideas to Consider
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Changing behavior is a complex subject, and often one wonders if it can happen at all. However, many people wonder how they can change their own behavior or help someone else to do so; I also think about this.

In 1973, as I was starting my ombuds work at MIT, I was working hard to figure out how to constrain my own unconscious biases, and avoid committing micro-inequities. However, if my bias was unconscious…. how could I change it? I read some of the literature about changing behaviors and seized on the idea that sometimes one may be able to *block* unwanted behavior by substituting another behavior that one wants anyway. I thought this practice might be relatively easy if the blocking behavior also brought its own rewards.

I thought to myself, "It's hard to catch my own commission of micro-inequities before I commit them. But if I focus on offering genuine and appropriate micro-affirmations, always and with everyone, perhaps I can block some of the bias that I have." In addition, practicing genuine micro-affirmations (which requires constantly looking for genuine achievements in the activities of others) cheers me—they are their own reward.

As another example, I realized that going running at lunchtime—in place of a long working lunch—might not only offer endorphins and help my fitness but discourage overeating. I began to see the power of the idea of blocking one behavior with another, in many situations; in my work as an MIT ombuds, the concept began to be useful to people who came to see me.

Were a few professors seen as brusque and as bullies but interested in changing this image? Could they force themselves to practice active listening with everyone, affirming in a genuine way at least *something* of what others said before launching a monologue? Would this bring them increased support from others? *And* could it help them block some of their brusque behavior? A number of faculty not only tried this idea but told me that they thought it helped—both at work and at home.

As I read more widely, I also observed other methods of effective—and less effective and ineffective—methods that supervisors used as they tried to help others change behavior seen as unacceptable. I watched management techniques that worked. I saw some supervisory techniques that helped a little, some that did not work, and some that seemed to make the unacceptable behavior worse—as one sees in the list below.

For example, I began to learn about punishment, and I began to understand why punishment so often is ineffective. Punishment of course may be required by law and policy. But it appears difficult to use punishment, either of ourselves—or of others—as a

method for changing behavior. To be most effective in changing behavior, most punishment, theoretically, should be unexpected, perfectly tailored to the gravity of the situation, easily understood by the recipient and onlookers—and the punishment should happen immediately. Achieving these conditions is hard to do.

What did I notice in my ombuds practice that may in fact have worsened the bad behavior of others—for example bullying? At the bottom of the list below, where "bad" behavior just gets worse or more entrenched, I saw examples of powerful people who regularly were promoted and lauded and given more responsibility—apparently because of their ability to get things done—despite widespread grumbling and numerous complaints. Often supervisees and peers, and even sometimes their bosses, could not wait to get out or get away from someone they saw as a bully. Some also daydreamed of getting even. Why did not numerous complaints succeed in changing unacceptable behavior?

If an ambitious bully is regularly rewarded on the job, it is easy to see why their unacceptable behavior continues. But it may be even worse to reward bullies, *and* also sometimes discipline them for bullying behavior.[1] In that circumstance, if the rewards continue, bullies may no longer notice complaints and discipline. Their mean behavior may seem to get cast into concrete.

Changing Behavior for Better or for Worse — Ideas to consider

These ideas are in an approximate order, from most likely to be effective (at the top of the list) to most likely to entrench existing behavior (at the bottom of the list). Ignoring bad behavior, on the list just up from the bottom, is unlikely to change a behavior although this option may sometimes be considered prudent. Actions at the bottom are more likely to reinforce a given behavior rather than change it.

1) Try to encourage and practice a good replacement behavior. Try to pick one that is valuable on its own—one that is rewarding and self-reinforcing—and that *blocks* the bad behavior that you hope will disappear.

2) Unexpectedly reward good behavior.

3) Reward good behavior.

4) Punish bad behavior unexpectedly (as quickly as possible).

5) Punish bad behavior.

6) "Name" what is good behavior and bad behavior.

7) Ignore bad behavior.

8) Reward bad behavior.

9) Alternately and unexpectedly reward and punish bad behavior.

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[1] NB: In thinking about rewards and punishment, it will be useful to consider *intangible* rewards and punishment as well as *tangible* rewards and punishment.