



Title: “Quest for Employee Engagement Part Three: PR+ Leadership and the Moment of Choice”

By Bill Sims, Jr.

www.safetyincentives.com

In Parts 1 and 2 of this story, I explained the three kinds of employees you have. When it comes to safety engagement, every company has just three kinds of workers: *Non-Compliant, Compliant, and Committed.*

See parts 1 and 2 at the link [here](#)

Every leader’s goal is to get the culture from compliance to commitment. And there is only one way to do that, through positive reinforcement, delivered on a daily basis by the leadership team. If you are a leader, your success in life will depend on your ability to deliver this reinforcement and it is the primary focus of the “PR+ Leadership”™ workshop that I teach around the world.

But, how precisely *do you get more positive reinforcement in your management system?* And how do you shift your culture from “I have to do it or I’ll be in trouble” to “I want to do it because I believe in it.”

How do you empower your employees to put safety first *in the moment of choice, when nobody is watching?*

To answer this question, I’d like us to take a little trip back in time. The year is 1981. OSHA had been formed back in the 1970’s and by 1981 it was really picking up speed as it began to enforce safety regulations and punish unsafe companies with fines and penalties.

During this time of heavy government regulation, I got a call from Donna Prejean, the newly appointed safety director of a highway construction firm in Mississippi. To make matters worse, she was a female, and she had the daunting task of getting her macho male construction workers to change their behavior.

“Bill, I feel like I’m having a nightmare. Every day I come to work and I can’t get my guys to wear their PPE. I come home hoarse every night from yelling at them to put on their hard hats, and wear their fall protection. It isn’t working, and I’m not changing their behavior.” Donna lamented.

“Why don’t you just fire one or two of them and the others will comply with your rules?” I asked her.

Donna laughed and said that the owner of her company didn’t even wear his PPE on the projects. He valued production over safety every time. She was powerless to enforce rules that her owner didn’t follow himself.

What had happened to Donna? She had fallen into the rut of using punishment and negative reinforcement in her attempts to modify behavior. Leave Alone/Zap was her default method of management.

“Donna, why don’t you try a little positive reinforcement?” I asked her.

“Some what?” she responded.

“Try reinforcing people for what they are doing right, instead of only focusing on what they do wrong.” I told her.

I sent Donna my “Care Package” which included everything she need to conduct her own experiment using R+ (Aubrey Daniels’ term for positive reinforcement). I sent Donna a large cooler chest similar to this one...



I reasoned that during the hot summer days, a road construction worker would use and appreciate a nice cooler to keep some ice and cold drinks handy.

Next, I told Donna to find one worker wearing their hardhat and smile, thank them, and present this gift to them *in front of the other workers*.

The next day she showed up unexpectedly at a construction site. Following my suggestion, she singled out the only worker who was demonstrating the desired behavior.

Of the 17 guys on the project, only the newest employee was wearing a hardhat (apparently nobody had yet told him that wearing his hardhat was uncool).

Donna walked over to the new employee in front of everyone, while she ignored those who were not wearing their protective gear. She publicly thanked him (that was a little risky but it worked out well this time) for wearing his hard hat, telling him, "Joe, I really appreciate your taking safety seriously. I sometimes lie awake at night worried that one of you won't go home to your families safely, and you're taking the time to follow our new safety rule means a lot to me. This gift is for you."

As the 16 rough, weathered construction workers watched, Donna presented to Joe the cooler chest I had sent her. Joe responded: "Thanks Donna! I've never won anything in my whole life, and nobody in safety has ever told me I did it right."

Now the 16 other construction workers asked Donna a question: "Where's our cooler chest, Donna?"

"Well guys, where are your hardhats? Maybe during my next safety audit, if I see you with your hardhats on, then we'll talk about cooler chests."

The impact on the other employees was immediate and powerful. On the next trip to the site, she was greeted by the entire crew smiling at her and pointing at their hardhats.
Positive Reinforcement Rocks!

Not only does this true story underscore the power of positive reinforcement, but it also prompts another question we are wise to ponder.

Was it the actual cooler chest itself that prompted the change in the worker behavior? Or was it Donna's sincere personal effort at thanking the worker? Was it perhaps some combination of the two?

This is very similar to the age old question of the "Chicken or the Egg—which came first?"

In my next article, I will explore the answer to what really prompted the change in behavior, based on research from the University of Waterloo. We'll also examine research that helps uncover the true nature of positive reinforcement.

The End....

What would you like Bill to write about in his next column?

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Bill Sims, Jr., is President of Bill Sims Behavior Change. For more than 50 years, the company has created behavior based recognition programs that inspire better performance from employees and increase bottom line profits.

Bill is currently writing a book entitled ***Green Beans & Ice Cream-The Definitive Recipe for Employee Engagement, Motivation and Recognition***, which is based on his experience having built more than 1,000 positive reinforcement systems at firms including Dupont, Siemens VDO, and Coca-Cola.