

# “If You Don’t Hear from Me You Know You Are Doing Fine”

## The Effects of Management Nonresponse to Employee Performance

by TIMOTHY R. HINKIN and CHESTER A. SCHRIESHEIM

A study of 243 employees of two different hospitality organizations compared the effects of managers’ giving feedback with no comments at all (favorable or unfavorable). The study found that feedback, formally known as contingent reinforcement, improves performance even when that feedback involves negative or corrective comments. Echoing previous studies, this research found a positive relationship between contingent rewards and workers’ effectiveness and satisfaction. Moreover, contingent punishment also had a small positive relationship with effectiveness and satisfaction. Going beyond previous work, however, this study found that managers’ omission of any commentary on good performance has a direct, albeit moderate, negative relationship with workers’ effectiveness and a small, direct negative relationship on satisfac-

tion. These findings point in the direction of the long-established psychological theory of operant conditioning, which suggests that a behavior that is totally ignored will eventually be extinguished. In this case, the behavior that will be lost is good service.

**Keywords:** leadership; reinforcement; feedback

**D**o the following comments sound familiar to you?

- “One of the major problems around here is that you don’t know how you are doing until you make a mistake, then you get hammered. It really discourages risk taking and makes everyone nervous.”

- “During the week of annual performance reviews there is so much tension that you can cut the air with a knife. No one really knows how they are doing until they get into the boss’s office.”
- “We all want to do a good job, but it would just be nice to know that you are appreciated once in a while.”

If grumblings such as these are heard in your organization, yours is not the exception. The fact is, in many organizations, people have not been informed of where they stand with regard to their performance. Are they doing well? Poorly? Making adequate progress? Uncertainty surrounding employees’ performance may result in such negative outcomes as reduced satisfaction, increased office politics, and high turnover. In this article, we seek to end the uncertainty by showing the linkage between appropriate supervisor performance-related comments and selected subordinate outcomes.

We have observed that a conflict exists in many organizations today between employees’ need for performance-related feedback and managers’ apparent unwillingness or inability to satisfy those needs. On one hand, there is considerable evidence suggesting that most subordinates desire feedback regarding their performance.<sup>1</sup> On the other, interviews with employees in a variety of organizational settings reveal that many managers are woefully inadequate when it comes to providing performance-related feedback to subordinates. The results of many years of study have found that managers are often hesitant to provide performance feedback, as illustrated by the following findings:

- Managers tend to provide feedback by exception, when performance is particularly good or particularly poor.
- Managers often provide general feedback that is not specifically related to behavior.

- Managers tend to provide more feedback when subordinate performance is improving than when it is declining.
- Managers tend to ignore their developmental role, and often employ feedback only if it affects their own performance.<sup>2</sup>

The many sources from which employees can receive feedback include supervisors, peers, and customers, as well as self-assessment. Although the high degree of guest contact for some positions in the hospitality industry provides an opportunity for feedback, many positions do not benefit from that contact. Moreover, the feedback that guest-contact employees receive from customers may not be related to performance at all. A recent study of tipping behavior, for example, found little relationship between customers’ satisfaction and the size of the tip they left.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, it is the supervisor whose feedback is likely to be the most salient to the subordinate. That is because the supervisor makes final decisions regarding job assignments, performance reviews, salary improvements, and promotions, and that person’s feedback should indicate the extent to which the subordinate is meeting the supervisor’s expectations.

In many studies, certain types of feedback have been shown to be related to performance. Although that connection is not always apparent, feedback also provides benefits other than positive effects on immediate performance.<sup>4</sup> We see two reasons that appropriate feedback is effective. First, it provides information that clarifies expectations for subsequent desired behavior. Second, it affects subordinates’ thoughts or feelings, such as pride, motivation, or guilt.<sup>5</sup> Lack of performance-related feedback could therefore result in confusion and dissatisfaction. As we said at the outset, the focus of this study is on the relationship between supervisors’ use of feedback that is

**Exhibit 1:****B. F. Skinner's Operant Conditioning Reinforcers**

<i>Reinforcer</i>	<i>Rationale</i>	<i>Example</i>
Positive reinforcement	Behavior that gets rewarded gets repeated	Providing praise for a job well done
Negative reinforcement	Behavior will be repeated to avoid an undesired outcome	Getting work done on time to avoid a reprimand
Punishment	Behavior that gets punished will not be repeated	Criticizing poor quality work
Extinction	Withholding a reward will weaken a response	Not responding to attempts at humor in staff meetings

Source: B. F. Skinner, *Contingencies of Reinforcement* (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1969).

directly linked to subordinate performance and a number of other outcome variables. At the theoretical level, supervisors' feedback can be considered contingent reinforcement, which has been shown to have a significant effect on subordinates' feelings and performance.<sup>6</sup> In this article, we present a brief overview of reinforcement theory and introduce a construct called omission, which is the nonresponse to subordinate performance. We then present a model showing how this behavior, or "nonbehavior," relates to subordinates' perceptions in hospitality settings.

### Reinforcement Theory

The use of reinforcement to shape an individual's behavior began with classic operant conditioning in the 1920s, as proposed by B. F. Skinner.<sup>7</sup> He found that a stimulus will produce a behavior. That, in turn, will result in a consequence, and the consequence will affect future behavior. There are two reinforcers that strengthen behaviors and two that weaken them, as noted in Exhibit 1.

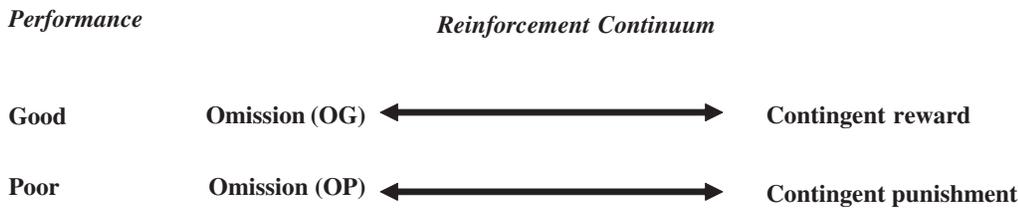
In the 1980s and early 1990s, a different approach to reinforcement was taken

by Podsakoff and his associates, who examined the effects of contingent reinforcement in work organizations.<sup>8</sup> Through a series of studies, contingent reward (CR) was found to have strong positive relationships with subordinate outcomes such as satisfaction and performance, and even contingent punishment (CP) had small positive relationships with the outcome measures. This stream of research highlighted the importance of a clear link between subordinates' behavior and the supervisor's response. Even punishment or reprimands can be positively received, as long as subordinates can see the relationship between their behavior and its consequence.

*Extinction.* Organizational studies have largely ignored the aspect of the theory that involves extinction, although interviews with employees in a variety of organizational settings suggest that "nonreinforcement" is a common managerial behavior. In classic reinforcement, extinction is the *intentional* withholding of a reward to extinguish a behavior. We believe that withholding reinforcement of any kind, whether intentional or uninten-

**Exhibit 2:**

## Reinforcement Continuum Typically Used by Managers



**Note:** OG = nonresponse to good performance; OP = nonresponse to poor performance.

tional, may eventually extinguish a behavior. When employee performance is high, such an outcome would be a negative for the operation. Performance ranges from very low to very high, and according to the reinforcement literature, managers' responses to that performance can have a major impact on future behavior. But what about managements' nonresponse to good or poor performance? Often employees receive no contingent reinforcement at all, which effectively is extinction, or what we call *omission* (see the diagram in Exhibit 2).

We conceptualize a manager's reinforcement behavior as typically falling on a continuum from omission to CR for high performance and from omission to CP for low performance. CR and CP are at the opposite ends of the reinforcement spectrum. Researchers have learned a lot about contingent and noncontingent reinforcement, as well as fixed and variable ratio and interval reinforcement, but to date no one has looked at the effect of omission. One natural assumption might be that doing nothing would have no effect, but we believe that this is not the case. We predict that not responding to good performance will have particularly harmful effects. Thus, managers who practice the "if you don't hear from me you know you are doing fine" approach may be doing

much more harm than they would suspect. The following vignettes illustrate the possible impact of inappropriate use of reinforcers in two work settings.

### Vignette 1: Inappropriate Response to Poor Performance

John Jones joined the XYZ Hotel Corporation with the intention of doing a good job. He brought with him several years of experience in a similar position. His manager, Bill Knowlton, did not provide John with much direction and left him pretty much on his own, as Bill has a hands-off management style. John truly believes he is doing a good job and has not heard otherwise. After several weeks, though, Bill calls John into his office, where he proceeds to severely reprimand John for his performance. He points out that this is the fourth time in the past few weeks that he has made an error with a large account and suggests that if John cannot do the job, he will find someone who can. John leaves the office bitter, muttering to himself, "Why didn't he tell me in the first place what I was doing wrong?"

Several things are going on here. Assuming that most people enter a job wishing to perform well, the manager's fundamental role is to then ensure that workers perform up to their ability. When employees are unclear about what they are

supposed to be doing, they do what they think they should. If incorrect behavior is not corrected, it will continue. In the above scenario, Bill made several key reinforcement errors. First, he failed to quickly respond to what he perceived to be less than satisfactory performance, an example of omission with poor performance (which we term OP in our model below). The effect of this nonreinforcement was continued errors made by John. It would have been more appropriate to negatively respond to the first error immediately, an example of CP. A simple reprimand accompanied by a prescribed course of action would most likely have prevented further incidents from ever occurring. In addition, Bill punished John in a manner that John perceived as being too severe for the offense, an example of noncontingent punishment. The net result of this interaction will be a reduction in John's satisfaction, role clarity, and possibly performance. It is also likely that he will leave the office with a reduced opinion of Bill's ability as a manager. Clearly, this manager is doing himself and the organization a disservice when he does not immediately respond appropriately to poor performance.

### Vignette 2: Inappropriate Response to Good Performance

ABC Corporation is a diversified food service company organized by divisions and product groups. Keith Wilson works in the franchise division, where he is one of nine product managers. Performance across product groups varies considerably. Over the past several months, Keith has worked hard to reduce his group's overall expenses by almost 20 percent while increasing market share. On Monday, Keith is notified that the division manager will be visiting on Friday and wishes to meet with all product managers

at lunch. Prior to the meal, the division manager shakes hands and slaps several product managers on the back, thanking them all for their great contribution. Following lunch, he gives a brief speech on the importance of everyone to the organization. He then disappears, not to be seen for the next two months. Keith leaves the luncheon wondering why he breaks his back when he receives no recognition for his efforts. In fact, he received the same praise as those managers whose operations were doing poorly. He is wondering if it might not be time to look for a new job.

As in the previous vignette, the point here is to highlight the damage that can be done by failing to reinforce desired performance. Keith is upset because he feels that his efforts have been overlooked, an example of omission in the case of good performance (OG, in our scheme). In addition, by praising everyone irrespective of their performance, the division manager was using a noncontingent reward, which has been shown to be unrelated to employee satisfaction or performance. The division manager could have had a much greater effect on motivation and performance had he used CR, specifically recognizing those who had done well. Once again, the effect of this interaction will not be what was desired. Keith will experience substantial dissatisfaction, role ambiguity, and conflict, as well as a lower opinion of the division manager's ability. Ultimately, he may seek employment in a company that will recognize and reward his efforts. Over time, high performers who are not rewarded for their performance will probably do one of two things, neither of which benefits the organization. The first option is to reduce performance, and the second is to leave the organization. High performers with marketable skills have little difficulty finding alternative employment, while

average performers remain and help to make an organization average.

## Relationships

We can make predictions about relationships among the constructs that we have been discussing, based on previous research. Consistent with our prior discussion, we expect CR to have a positive relationship with role clarity. Additionally, when a manager is able to make clear for a subordinate what the expectations are for the job, the subordinate should then perceive that the manager is effective and be increasingly satisfied with the manager. We predict, therefore, that CR would also have a positive relationship with perceptions of satisfaction and effectiveness.

As mentioned previously, CP informs a person about what not to do but does not instruct him or her as to what behavior is desired. As such, its use could have a small positive relationship with role clarity, but not nearly to the extent that CR would have. Prior studies of CP have also shown it to have small, positive correlations with satisfaction with the supervisor. We could also predict that CP would have a small positive relationship with perceptions of effectiveness.

We would expect CR and OG to have opposite effects on each of these variables. The relationships of CP or CR with OP are slightly more difficult to predict. We could expect OP's use to be negatively related to role clarity, effectiveness, and satisfaction, but it is unclear what the strength of these relations might be.

*Sample.* The sample consisted of 243 employees from two hospitality organizations. They held both line-level and managerial positions, and the referent in the survey was their direct supervisor. The average age was thirty-eight, average ten-

## Technical Procedure

Questionnaire items were developed or taken from the Leader Reward and Punishment Questionnaire (LRPQ) to measure leader omission in response to both good and poor subordinate performance. Once the data were collected, an exploratory factor analysis was undertaken on the twenty-one nonomission LRPQ items to select the best four contingent reward (CR) and contingent punishment (CP) items to retain for further analysis. The original CR scale consisted of ten items, the CP scale was five items, and the noncontingent reward (NCR) and noncontingent punishment (NCP) scales consisted of four items each. The obtained factor structure was excellent, with high similarity to those reported by Podsakoff, Todor, and Skov in two different studies, and good dimensional clarity (virtually no meaningful cross-loadings of items on inappropriate factors). The four highest-loading items on both factors were thus selected to represent the CR and CP dimensions so all six measures consisted of four items. The omission and contingent reinforcement items are presented in the appendix. Confirmatory factor analyses were then conducted on the CR, CP, omission in response to good performance (OG), and omission in response to poor performance (OP) items to examine two competing models, one consisting of two factors, the other consisting of four factors.

**Note:** See P. M. Podsakoff, W. D. Todor, and R. Skov, "Effects of Leader Contingent and Noncontingent Reward and Punishment Behaviors on Subordinate Performance and Satisfaction," *Academy of Management Journal* 25, no. 4 (1982): 810-21; and C. A. Schriesheim, T. R. Hinkin, and P. M. Podsakoff, "Is Perceived Omission a Meaningful Construct for Leader Reinforcement Research? An Exploratory Investigation," in *Proceedings of the Southern Management Association* (1989), 118-20.

ure with their company 4.4 years, and the sample was 56 percent female.

*Measures.* The CR and CP items and the omission items were previously developed using an independent sample and are presented in the appendix.<sup>9</sup> Technical details involving the procedure are found in the accompanying sidebar. The other scales include role clarity, the degree to which subordinates understand their organizational role, satisfaction with the supervisor, and supervisor effective-

**Exhibit 3:**  
Correlations between the Variables

	<i>OG</i>	<i>OP</i>	<i>CR</i>	<i>CP</i>	<i>CLAR</i>	<i>EFF</i>	<i>SAT</i>
OG							
OP	.38**						
CR	-.77**	-.32**					
CP	-.09	-.52**	.09				
CLAR	-.38**	-.31**	.48**	.16*			
EFF	-.64**	-.34**	.67**	.19**	.57**		
SAT	-.63**	-.37**	.65**	.23**	.53**	.75**	

**Note:**  $N = 243$ . OG = omission with good performance; OP = omission with poor performance; CR = contingent reward; CP = contingent punishment; CLAR = role clarity; EFF = effectiveness; and SAT = satisfaction.

ness—all of which had been used in previous studies.<sup>10</sup>

## Results

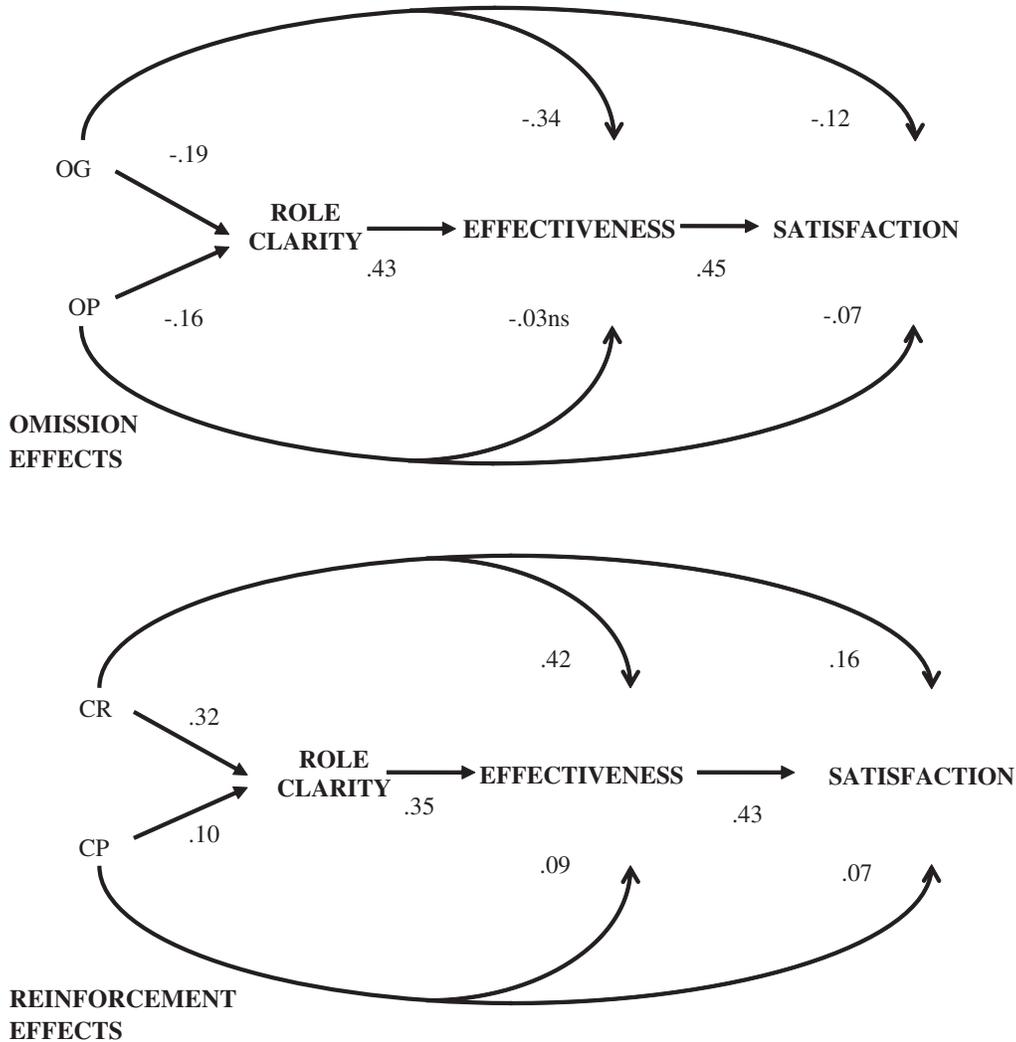
We learn several interesting things from the correlations between the variables in the two samples, which are presented in Exhibit 3. Looking first at the relationships between the reinforcers, there is no significant relationship between CR and CP, suggesting that supervisors' use of one or the other of these reinforcers is unrelated. In contrast, the relationship between the two types of omission (OG and OP) is moderately strong, implying that supervisors who do not respond to good performance would also be prone to disregard poor performance. Strong negative correlations were found for CR with OG and for CP with OP, consistent with our previous discussion and Exhibit 2. OG had a nonsignificant relationship with CP, suggesting that the use of these two behaviors is largely unrelated.<sup>11</sup>

Looking at the positive relationships between the contingent reinforcers and role clarity, satisfaction, and effectiveness, we see that results are as predicted and are consistent with prior research findings. As in previous studies, CP had small positive relationships with the outcome measures.

OG had strong negative relationships with these variables, while OP demonstrated moderate negative relationships. While interesting, correlational analysis does not really take into account the simultaneous interrelationships that may exist between the variables. A data analysis technique called structural equation modeling allows us, however, to examine the mediating effects of the variables with the use of reinforcement. Along that line, consider the models presented in Exhibit 4.

Exhibit 4 shows the unstandardized path coefficients for the two models.<sup>12</sup> Looking first at CR and CP, we see that relationships are consistent with prior research. CR demonstrated a moderate, direct, positive relationship with effectiveness (.42) and satisfaction (.16); while CP had a small positive relationship with those variables (.09 with effectiveness, .07 with satisfaction). The model shows that CR and CP are still related to role clarity, which in turn is positively related to effectiveness. There is a strong positive relationship between effectiveness and satisfaction. With respect to omission, the results are all in the predicted directions. OG has a moderate, direct, negative relationship with effectiveness (−.34); while OP has no significant relationship (−.03).

**Exhibit 4:**  
LISREL Structural Models



**Note:**  $N = 243$ . All loadings are significant ( $p < .05$ ) unless noted. OG = nonresponse to good performance; OP = nonresponse to poor performance; CR = contingent reward; CP = contingent punishment. Fit indices for the above structural equation model were as follows:

	Omission	Reinforcement
NFI	.95	.97
CFI	.95	.98
RMSEA	.17	.12

Hu and Bentler suggest that normed fit index (NFI) and comparative fit index (CFI) scores close to .95 indicate a relatively good fit to the data. They also suggest a root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) of .08 indicates a good fit, but with small samples ( $N < 250$ ), RMSEA tends to overreject true-population models and is a less preferable index. See L. T. Hu and P. M. Bentler, "Fit Indices in Covariance Structure Modeling: Sensitivity to Under-Parameterized Model Misspecification," *Psychological Methods* 3 (1998): 424-53.

Both types of omission have a small, direct, negative relationship with satisfaction (OG at  $-.12$ , OP at  $-.07$ ). Once again, there is a strong positive relationship between role clarity and effectiveness (.43) and between effectiveness and satisfaction (.45).

### Discussion and Implications

The benefit of contingent reinforcement has long been known and was demonstrated again in this study. Prior studies have used strictly correlational statistical methods. However, while our results were

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*Managers need to tell their workers when they have done a good job—and when they have not. In this instance, silence is not golden.*

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consistent with previous CR and CP research, the mediating effects of perceptions of effectiveness on other outcome variables that were revealed in the structural equation model is a new finding. The direct relationship between CR and CP and satisfaction was reduced.

*Don't do nothing.* What has not been known heretofore, however, are the effects stemming from the lack of reinforcement. A common assumption among many managers is that doing nothing will have no effect. Instead, it is associated with reduced role clarity, diminished perceptions of a manager's effectiveness, and increased dissatisfaction. The implication here is that those people making the greatest contribution to an organization and who receive no recognition will likely be the least satisfied of employees—a situation that has been shown to be related to turnover and withdrawal. Although the

correlational nature of this study prevents us from suggesting causality, application of Skinner's concept of extinction predicts that overlooking good performance would, over time, eventually extinguish that high performance.<sup>13</sup> Those who are subjected to OG will have a low opinion of their supervisor's effectiveness and, in turn, will be dissatisfied with the supervisor. This also means that lack of reinforcement could possibly result in other negative feelings that would be related to effectiveness, such as trust or respect. OP was negatively related to role clarity, effectiveness, and satisfaction, but that correlation barely reached statistical significance. It would appear that when people think they are performing poorly and are left alone, they will be slightly confused and somewhat unhappy—but perhaps that is why they are not performing well.

*Three managerial types.* The finding regarding the actual use of the reinforcers was also quite interesting. Overall, we found that those managers who do not respond to good performance will also tend to overlook poor performance. In contrast, the use of CR and CP was unrelated, meaning those who tend to use CR may not be those who use CP. Thus, with respect to reinforcement, it appears that there are three types of managers, namely, those who look for good performance, those who look for poor performance, and those who do little in the way of reinforcing behavior at all. Overall, we see a statistically significant difference between each of the averages for these measures; CP was used most frequently, followed by CR, OG, and OP. We also noted interesting patterns in the use of reinforcement in the study by examining responses from the two organizations independently. In one organization, CP was used most com-

monly and OW was used just as much as CR, while managers in the other organization made greater use of CR and CP than they did omission. This could have implications about the culture of the organizations. In that regard, one could easily imagine an organization where the dominant management style is punitive and good performance is not recognized.

To review, this is the first study in which omission of management reinforcement was examined in an organizational context. As such, it is exploratory, but the fact that the results with CR and CP were all consistent with prior studies should increase our confidence in the findings of this study with respect to omission. We have found that omitting feedback does have negative consequences and that those managers who do not respond to good performance are going to be perceived negatively by their subordinates. Future research involving omission will need to look at other outcome variables such as motivation, intent to leave, and impact on performance over time.

## Conclusion

The most important conclusion from this study is that any anxiety that managers might have about providing feedback is largely unfounded, but reinforcement must be used appropriately to achieve the desired effect. Managers should not hesitate to provide feedback that is contingent on subordinate performance. Reinforcement, whether positive or negative, should focus on behavior and convey useful information to subordinates. It is particularly important that the use of CP be accompanied by a description of the prescribed appropriate behavior. Managers would be advised to use both CR and CP to improve subordinates' performance as well as their perceptions of the manager. Most particularly, the common practice of

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## Appendix: Survey Items for Perceived Leader Reinforcement

### Omission in Response to Good Performance (OG)

- I often perform well in my job and still receive no praise from my supervisor. (Reverse-scored Leader Reward and Punishment Questionnaire [LRPQ] CR item 10)
- When I perform well, my supervisor does nothing.
- My good performance often goes unacknowledged by my supervisor. (Reverse-scored LRPQ CR item 09)
- My supervisor gives me no feedback when I perform well.

### Omission in Response to Poor Performance (OP)

- I don't get criticized by my supervisor when I perform poorly.
- My supervisor gives me no feedback when I perform poorly.
- My poor performance often goes unacknowledged by my supervisor.
- When I perform poorly, my supervisor does nothing.

### Contingent Reward (CR) Behavior

- My supervisor would quickly acknowledge an improvement in the quality of my work. (LRPQ CR item 03)
- My supervisor gives me special recognition when my performance is especially good. (LRPQ CR item 02)
- My supervisor always gives me positive feedback when I perform well. (LRPQ CR item 01)
- My supervisor commends me when I do a better than average job. (LRPQ CR item 04)

### Contingent Punishment (CP) Behavior

- My supervisor would reprimand me if my work was below standard. (LRPQ CP item 14)
  - When my work is not up to par, my supervisor points it out to me. (LRPQ CP item 15)
  - My supervisor lets me know about it when I perform poorly. (LRPQ CP item 13)
  - My supervisor shows his/her displeasure when my work is below acceptable levels. (LRPQ CP item 12)
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“if you don’t hear from me you know you are doing fine” should be avoided. Omission as a response to good performance is clearly not a desirable way to manage, and OP will only lead to further poor performance.

### Endnotes

1. K. A. Karl, A. M. O’Leary-Kelly, and J. J. Martocchio, “The Impact of Feedback and Self-Efficacy on Performance in Training,” *Journal of Organizational Behavior* 14 (1993): 379-94.
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3. M. Lynn, “Restaurant Tipping and Service Quality: A Tenuous Relationship,” *Cornell Hotel and Restaurant Administration Quarterly* 42, no. 1 (2001): 14-20.
4. A. N. Kluger and A. DeNisi, “The Effects of Feedback Interventions on Performance: A Historical Review, a Meta-Analysis, and a Preliminary Feedback Intervention Theory,” *Psychological Bulletin* 119, no. 2 (1996): 254-84.
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10. For example, see J. R. Rizzo, R. J. House, and S. E. Lirtzman, “Role Conflict and Ambiguity in Complex Organizations,” *Administrative Science Quarterly* 15 (1970): 150-63 (Sample item: “I feel certain about how much authority I have.”); D. J. Weiss, R. V. Dawis, and L. H. Lofquist, *Manual for the Minnesota Satisfaction Questionnaire* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Industrial Relations Center, 1967) (Sample item: “The competence of my supervisor in making decisions”); and T. R. Hinkin and J. B. Tracey, “Transformational Leadership in the Hospitality Industry,” *Hospitality Research Journal* 18 (1994): pp. 49-63 (Sample item: “Communication—Provides me with relevant information”). All measures had internal consistency reliabilities greater than .80.
11. The four-factor model was not supported by the confirmatory factor analysis. All of the fit indices were less than .80, and the root mean square residual was quite large, at 1.023. In contrast, the two-factor model, with CR and OG on one factor and CP and OP on the other, provided a much better fit to the data (the CR and CP items had negative loadings). The comparative fit index (CFI) was .977, the adjusted goodness-of-fit index (AGFI) was .933, and the root mean square residual was .286. These results support the concept of the performance-related continuum presented in Exhibit 2.
12. L. T. Hu and P. M. Bentler, “Fit Indices in Covariance Structure Modeling: Sensitivity to Under-Parameterized Model Misspecification,” *Psychological Methods* 3 (1998): 424-53.
13. Skinner, *Contingencies of Reinforcement*.

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