Classical Conditioning in Behavior Management

Although most managers will not directly employ the principles of classical conditioning, it is important for them to understand the process. First, it can help explain why punitive or disciplinary actions should be avoided or used with caution. Second, managers may find an understanding of classical conditioning useful in modifying their own behavior.

The basic principles of classical conditioning were first discovered in Pavlov's experiments with dogs. At step one Pavlov presented meat (the unconditioned stimulus) to a hungry dog, and the dog responded with the unconditioned response of salivation (called “unconditioned” because it is an unlearned, or
reflexive, stimulus-response association). Next, through a process called pairing, Pavlov rang a bell at the same time that he presented the meat to the dog. Again, the dog responded by salivating. Pavlov repeated this step many times. Finally, he rang the bell but did not present the meat, and the dog salivated anyway (step three), because it had learned to salivate at the sound of a bell. The bell is the conditioned stimulus and the salivation is the conditioned response. The association is called "conditioned" because dogs don't normally salivate at the sound of a bell. 

**Classical conditioning** is the process by which phobias or irrational fears as well as emotional reactions to certain situations (the manifestation of such respondent behaviors as increased heart rate, rapid breathing, and sweating palms) are learned. Suppose you were riding a horse and it threw you off. Being thrown through the air would be the unconditioned stimulus, and the fear you experienced would be the unconditioned response. As a result of this incident, you may very likely have learned to respond with fear to sitting on a horse—or even to the sight of a horse—because of its association with your having been thrown. Folk wisdom would tell you to get right back on the horse, because by doing so you can break the fearful association and thus unlearn or extinguish your fear of horses.

Consider the dog once again. In step four, Pavlov paired a light with the bell and found that once again the dog salivated. After repeating this procedure a number of times, the dog salivated at the sight of the light alone. This is called higher-order conditioning, because a conditioned stimulus was used in the pairing.

**Most emotional reactions are learned through the process of higher-order conditioning.** Suppose somebody has learned to respond anxiously to criticism. If this person is then criticized several times by the boss, that individual may learn to respond anxiously in the boss's presence, even when the boss is not being critical, because the boss has been paired with the aversive (unpleasant or painful) stimulus of criticism. Through higher-order conditioning, the boss will eventually become a conditioned stimulus that elicits anxiety. It is called "higher-order" because the stimulus used in the pairing or conditioning is itself conditioned, i.e., the employee's anxiety. Higher-order conditioning is one way in which some people learn to display strong emotional reactions to certain minority groups or nationalities—even though they have had little or no personal contact with these groups.

**Higher-order conditioning also refers to the way in which words can have different connotations to different people.**

For conditioning to occur, a person need not be aware of the process, nor is the selection of the conditioned stimulus a conscious choice in most cases. (People who understand the laws of learning, however, can employ these laws to condition themselves in ways they choose. Anything that is present in the situation when a person experiences an aversive stimulus might become paired with that stimulus, and thus condition the same emotional response. For example, in the case of the critical boss, the office in which the critical remarks were made might also come to elicit anxiety in the person who was the object of the boss's criticism.

People who experience a lot of vague anxiety might be conditioned to respond with anxiety to many stimuli of which they are unaware. The color green might elicit anxiety in someone who, as a child, was severely spanked on a green carpet; small rooms might elicit anxiety because the spanking occurred in a small room, so that when in the presence of green or in a small room, this individual might feel vaguely anxious and be unaware that small rooms and the color green are the conditioned stimuli that are eliciting this anxiety.

**Positive emotional responses to environmental stimuli are learned in the same manner.** In most cases conditioning will be extinguished or lose its hold on the individual if the unconditioned stimulus is never again paired with the conditioned stimulus. For example, in the case of the hungry dog, if the meat is never again paired with the bell, the dog will eventually stop salivating at the sound of the bell.

However, when the conditioned response is anxiety or another strong emotion, the conditioning can become self-perpetuating because the sensation of anxiety is itself uncomfortable. Thus, when the conditioned response is anxiety, the feeling of anxiety is continually paired with the conditioned stimulus and is continually reconditioning the person. Thus, the person who was spanked on the green carpet might continue to respond with anxiety to the color green, even if such a punitive incident were never to occur again.

**Conditioning is not a static process; it may generalize or become more discriminative.** Conditioning "generalizes" when stimuli similar to the conditioned stimulus can elicit the conditioned response. The classic experiment that established this phenomenon was the case of an 11-month-old...
child, "Little Albert." By repeatedly pairing a white rat with loud noise in front of Albert, experimenters were able to condition the child to cry (a fear response) at the sight of a white rat.

The psychologists who performed the experiment discovered that after the conditioning Albert also cried at the sight of other white furry things, such as a white rabbit, a white dog, and a hairy Santa Claus mask. In this case, the conditioning "generalized" to several white furry objects.

Discrimination is essentially the opposite process. Discrimination occurs when the conditioned stimulus elicits the conditioned response only under certain conditions. Discriminative learning takes place when there is a third stimulus that is present each time the pairing occurs but that is not present when the pairing does not occur. For example, the anxious employee may learn to discriminate among the critical boss's expressions: The boss is critical only when he frowns; but when he doesn't frown, he does not criticize. In this case, the employee could learn to respond anxiously only when the boss frowns.