

# UNIT 20 – UPSC- Learning and Reinforcement (Organisational Behaviour and Design)

It is a principal motivation for many employees to stay in organizations. Learning has a major impact on individual behaviour as it influences abilities, role perceptions and motivation. Along with its role in individual behaviour, learning is necessary for knowledge management. Knowledge management improves an organization's capacity to obtain, share and use knowledge in order to improve its operations and success.



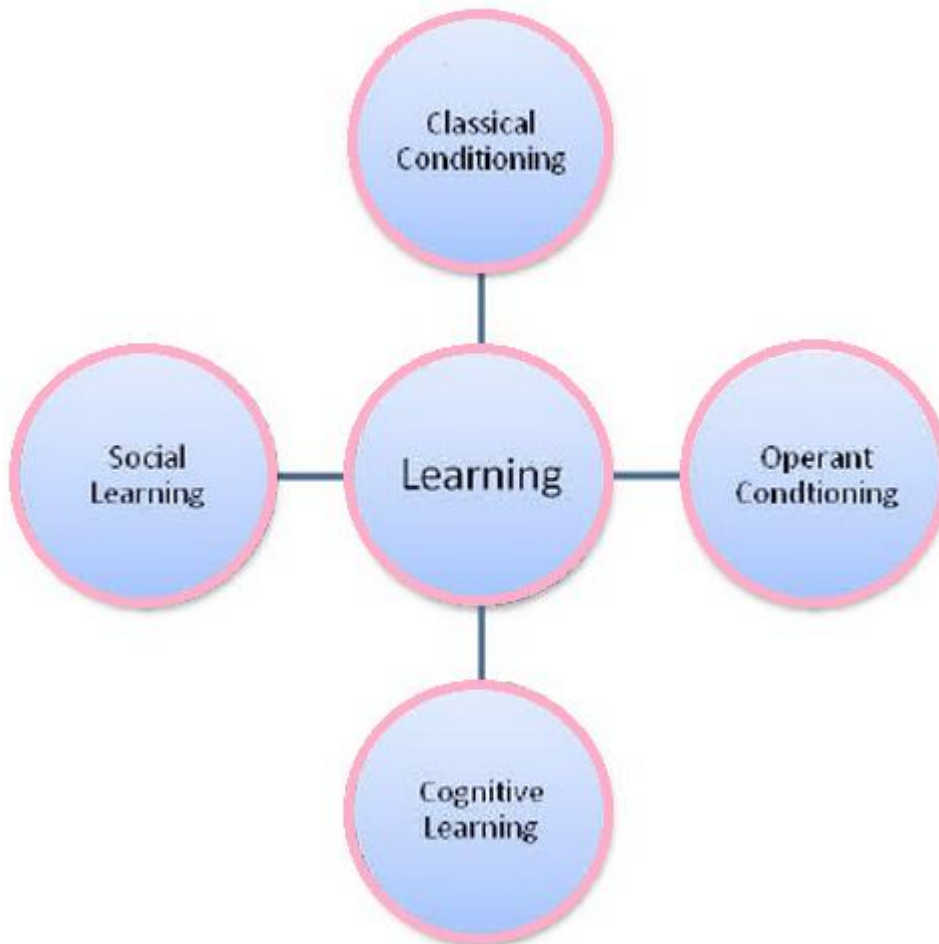
## Concept of Learning

Learning is a permanent change in behaviour due to experience or training. Learning is understood as the adaptation of behaviour through practice, training, or experience. According to Carl Rogers (1983), learning is a powerful encouragement for many employees to stay in certain organizations. Learning has a major impact on individual behaviour as it influences abilities, role perceptions and motivation. Along with its role in individual behaviour, learning is necessary for knowledge management. Knowledge management enhances an organization's capacity to acquire, share and utilize knowledge for success. There are five important components of learning. Learning involves change that may be for good or bad. Change may not be evident until a situation arises in which the new behaviour can occur. Learning is not always reflected in performance. Second component of learning is that not all changes reproduce learning. To constitute learning, change should be comparatively permanent. Temporary changes may be only reflective and fail to represent any learning. This requirement rules out behavioural changes caused by fatigue or drugs. Thirdly, learning is reflected in behaviour that is a change in an individual's thought process or attitude, not accompanied by behaviour. Learning needs to result in behaviour potentiality and not necessarily in the behaviour itself. The reason for this difference is that an individual may learn but owing to lack of motivation, may not show any changed behaviour. The change in behaviour

should take place as a result of experience, practice or training. This implies that behaviour caused from maturity, disease, or physical damages do not constitute learning.

## Theoretical Framework of Learning

There are four theories which give details about the process of learning. They are Classical conditioning, Operant conditioning, Cognitive theory and Social learning theory.



Classical conditioning is based on the principle that a physical event referred as a stimulus that originally does not elicit a particular response and gradually acquires the capacity to elicit that response as a result of repeated pairing with a stimulus that elicits a reaction. This category of learning is relatively common and has an important role in such reactions as strong fears, taste aversions, some aspects of sexual behaviour and even racial or ethnic prejudice. The first model, classical conditioning, was initially recognized by Pavlov in the salivation reflex of dogs. Salivation is an innate reflex, or unconditioned response, to the presentation of food, an unconditioned stimulus. Pavlov demonstrated that dogs could be conditioned to salivate merely to the sound of a buzzer (a conditioned stimulus), after it was sounded a number of times in conjunction with the presentation of food. Learning is said to occur because salivation has been conditioned to a new stimulus that did not elicit it initially. The pairing of food with the buzzer acts to reinforce the buzzer as the prominent stimulus.

Another important theory about learning is operant conditioning also known as instrumental conditioning denotes to the process that people's behaviour produces certain consequences. If

actions of people have pleasant effects, then they will be more likely to repeat them in the future. If, however, their actions have unpleasant effects, they are less likely to repeat them in the future. Therefore, this theory showed that behaviour is the function of its consequences. The well-known Skinner box verified operant conditioning by placing a rat in a box in which the pressing of a small bar produces food. Skinner displayed that the rat eventually learns to press the bar regularly in order to obtain food. Besides reinforcement, punishment produces avoidance behaviour, which appears to weaken learning but not curtail it. In both types of conditioning, stimulus generalization occurs that is the conditioned response may be elicited by stimuli similar to the original conditioned stimulus but not used in the original training. Stimulus generalization has huge practical significance, because it allows for the application of learned behaviours across different contexts. Behaviour alteration is a type of treatment resulting from these stimulus/response models of learning. It operates under the assumption that if behaviour can be learned, it can also be unlearned. Operant conditioning emphasizes voluntary behaviours.

Cognitive theory of learning presupposes that the human being learns the significance of various objects and event and learned responses depending on the meaning assigned to stimuli. Wolfgang Kohler demonstrated that a protracted process of trial-and-error may be replaced by a sudden understanding that grasps the interrelationships of a problem. This process, called insight, is more similar to piecing together a puzzle than responding to a stimulus. Edward Tolman (1930) showed that unrewarded rats learned the layout of a maze, yet this was not apparent until they were later rewarded with food. Tolman referred to this latent learning, and it has been recommended that the rats developed cognitive maps of the maze that they were able to apply immediately when a reward was offered. The cognitive theory of learning is applicable in the modern managerial practices. Many motivation theories centre on the concept of cognition. Expectations, attributions and locus of control are all cognitive concepts requiring attention while encouraging workers.

**Social learning theory:** This theory is also referred as observational learning, social learning theory, highlights the capability of an individual to learn by observing others. The central models may include parents, teachers, peers, motion pictures, TV artists, and bosses. An individual obtains new knowledge by observing what happens to his or her model. This is commonly known as vicarious learning. A learner acquires unspoken knowledge and skills through vicarious learning. Social learning has significant relevance in organizational behaviour. A great deal of what is learned about how to behave in organizations can be explained as the result of the process of observational learning. A new hire obtains job skills by observing what an experienced employee does. Observational learning also occurs in a very informal and in unarticulated manner.

It is concluded that learning in organization draws more appeal from the assumption that organizations are capable of intelligent behaviour, and that learning is an instrument for intelligence, though sometimes an attractively unreliable one. The basic image is that organizations collect experiences, draw inferences, and encode inferences in repositories of organizational knowledge, such as formal rules and informal practices.

## **Reinforcement**

Reinforcement is a process to develop or strengthen pleasing behaviour. Reinforcement hypothesis is the method of shaping behaviour by controlling the consequences of the behaviour. In

reinforcement theory a combination of rewards and/or punishments is used to strengthen desired behaviour or put out unwanted behaviour. Any behaviour that elicits a consequence is called operant behaviour, because the individual operates on his or her environment. Reinforcement theory focuses on the relationship between the operant behaviour and the related consequences, and is also called as operant conditioning. Major contributor of this theory was B.F. Skinner who developed modern ideas about reinforcement theory. Skinner argued that the internal needs and drives of individuals can be ignored because people learn to exhibit certain behaviors based on what happens to them as a result of their behaviour. Management team must always try to shape employee behaviours to get better contributions to the company. This can involve supporting positive behaviours or reducing negative behaviours.

There are many types of reinforcement: positive and negative.

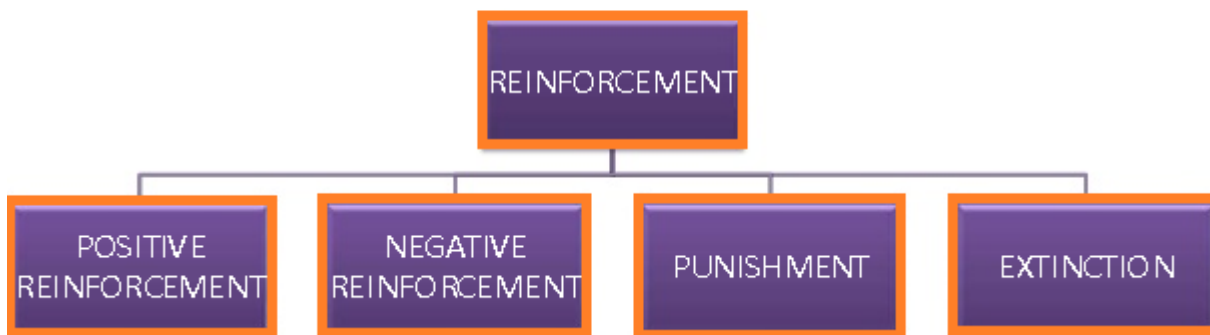
Positive reinforcement strengthens and enhances behaviour by the presentation of positive reinforcers. There are primary reinforcers and secondary reinforcers. Primary reinforcers satisfy basic biological needs and include food and water. However, primary reinforcers do not always reinforce. For instance, food may not be a reinforcer to someone who has just completed a five course meal. Most behaviours in organizations are influenced by secondary reinforcers. These include benefits in organizational set up. Positive reinforcement defines and communicates expected behaviours and strengthens the connection between high performance and rewards. It reinforces an employee's behaviour immediately after learning a new technique and promotes quick, thorough learning. It motivates effective workers to continue to do good work. Lack of reinforcement leads to job dissatisfaction. It increases productivity by rewarding workers who conserve time and materials. Employees who are rewarded after they successfully perform feel self-confident and become eager to learn new techniques, take advanced training, and accept more responsibility.

Rewarding employees who suggest improved work procedures will produce more innovation, it creates a relaxed work environment, reward new ideas and tolerate innovative failures.

In negative reinforcement, a disagreeable event that precedes a behaviour is removed when the desired behaviour occurs. This process increases the likelihood that the desired behaviour will occur. Just as there are positive reinforcers, there are the stimuli that strengthen responses that permit an organism to avoid or escape from their presence. Some negative reinforcers such as intense heat, extreme cold, or electric shock, exert their effects the first time they are encountered, whereas others acquire their impact through repeated association.

**Punishment:** Punishment is an undesirable outcome a worker receives for bad behaviour. This can involve actions such as demoting the employee or suspending the employee. A manager may put an employee on trial pending a change in behaviour. Additionally, the employee may lose overtime privileges or consideration for raises.

**Extinction:** Extinction is the elimination of a behaviour. This type of behaviour modification should be reserved for the most damaging behaviours. When individual want an immediate and complete stop to unwanted actions, such as smoking on the job or using sexual innuendo, offer the most severe punishment, such as firing, if person see any more of the behaviour. Managers should make the consequences clear and make sure employees know there will be zero tolerance.



**Schedules of reinforcement:** Reinforcement schedule is the timing of the behavioural consequences that follow a given behaviour. Fundamentally, there are two types of reinforcement schedules that include continuous and intermittent. If a behaviour is reinforced each time it occurs, it is called continuous reinforcement. Theoretical studies have demonstrated that continuous reinforcement is the best way to establish new behaviours or to eliminate undesired behaviours. However, this type of reinforcement is generally not practical in an organizational setting. Therefore, intermittent schedules are usually employed. Intermittent reinforcement means that each instance of a desired behaviour is not reinforced. There are at least four types of intermittent reinforcement schedules: fixed interval, fixed ratio, variable interval, and variable ratio. Fixed interval schedules of reinforcement take place when desired behaviours are reinforced after set periods of time. In organization, a fixed interval schedule is a weekly paycheque. A fixed interval schedule of reinforcement does not appear to be a particularly strong way to elicit desired behaviour, and behaviour learned in this way may be subject to rapid extinction. The fixed ratio schedule of reinforcement applies the reinforcer after a set number of occurrences of the desired behaviours. An organizational example of this schedule is a sales commission based on number of units sold. Like the fixed interval schedule, the fixed ratio schedule may not produce consistent, long-lasting, behavioural change. Variable interval reinforcement schedules are used when desired behaviours are reinforced after varying periods of time. For example, there would be special recognition for successful performance and promotions to higher-level positions. This reinforcement schedule appears to elicit desired behavioural change that is resistant to extinction. Lastly, the variable ratio reinforcement schedule applies the reinforcer after a number of desired behaviours have occurred, with the number changing from situation to situation. In organization, variable ratio schedules are bonuses or special awards that are applied after varying numbers of desired behaviours occur. Variable ratio schedules appear to produce desired behavioural change that is reliable and very resistant to extinction.

Major function of the laws of reinforcement theory to organizational set up is behavioural modification, or behavioural contingency management. Characteristically, a behavioural modification program comprises of four steps:

- I. Specifying the desired behaviour as objectively as possible.
- II. Measuring the current incidence of desired behaviour.
- III. Providing behavioural consequences that reinforce desired behaviour.

- IV. Determining the effectiveness of the program by systematically assessing behavioural change.

Organization's management style can integrate each style of reinforcement. However, contemporary organization theories generally advocate a focus on positive reinforcement, which encourages employee development and empowerment by nurturing pioneering and proactive behaviour. On the contrary, management styles that focus on negative reinforcement tend to be controlling because supervisors must confirm compliance before removing negative stimuli, which requires heavy control and observation.

Reinforcement theory is significant in changing the behaviour of employees in organizational environment as it explains how people learn behaviour. It is regularly applied to organizational settings in the situation of a behavioural modification program. The theory of reinforcement theory is disapproved for its principles that offer important insight into individual learning and motivation. It can be concluded that workers should be encouraged when they have a chance to perform a challenging task in the dissimilar situation in which performance depends on the skills and feedback is given regarding the performance. Reinforcement theory assists how individual or employee progress their learning skills and improve their self-confidence to attain their goals and contribute in the organization's growth.