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How Was Your Weekend?
And Other Not So Frequently Asked Questions
Kelle Wright

Dean and I have been great friends. For almost two years, we have laughed and cried together. For almost two years, we have shared secrets and occasional 'bad date' stories. And for almost two years, I have been bothered by Dean's not inquiring about my life.

This may sound strange considering that he's one of my best friends, but it's true. If I want to talk about anything, Dean listens. Even when I blabber on, he never complains. But I always have to offer the information. He never asks.

Once, I talked to him about this. I told him that it would be nice to know that he was interested in how my date went or what I did over the weekend. His response? "You know I'm interested, I just don't want to be nosey. I figure if you want me to know something, you'll tell me." Of course, he was right!

I had assumed that a "lack of interest" explained Dean's not inquiring about my life, but what about my behavior? I had never waited for him to ask me questions, but quickly volunteered information. In some way, my volunteering information without being asked was reinforcing behavior other than his asking. I decided to change my behavior so that Dean would inquire about my life.

First I tried negative reinforcement to increase Dean's questions. I figured that by not volunteering any information, I would cause long periods of uncomfortable silence. I thought that Dean's asking questions would terminate this aversive silence and so be reinforced. Unfortunately the silence bothered me much more than Dean. Although he commented on my silence, he seemed to be perfectly at ease. I, on the other hand, was very uncomfortable and gave in rather quickly by telling Dean about my weekend plans.

Next, I tried a procedure I could more easily put into effect. I decided I would prompt Dean to ask me a question and then positively reinforce his asking. A prompt is a stimulus that is added to the environment that occasions a desired response. My prompts were short statements about something I had done, without elaboration.

I first implemented this procedure on Monday night when Dean and I had met at a bar. While talking, I casually stated, "I had such a great time this weekend." I could tell that Dean was waiting for me to elaborate, but I remained silent. He then asked, "Well, what did you do?" I said, "I'll tell you all about it, but let me get us another round of drinks." Buying Dean a drink seemed to please him and he listened very

attentively to the story about my weekend. I repeated this routine a few times that night, and it was pretty successful though there were some disadvantages. I noticed that my money supply was getting lower and that my blood alcohol level was getting higher. I was also starting to feel like I was bribing Dean. I decided that next time I would use different reinforcement.

When next together I prompted Dean: "I went out with a new guy last week." Once again, Dean seemed to be waiting for me to elaborate but I remained silent until he asked, "What's he like?" I began with, "Well, he's no you, but he's okay." Dean smiled and I think he even blushed. Throughout the evening, I repeated the procedure. I would make a statement about some past activity without elaboration (the prompt), he would ask a question (the desired response) and somewhere in my answer I would include a compliment (the reinforcer). By the night's end, Dean was no longer waiting for me to elaborate after the prompt, but immediately questioning me!

The next few times Dean and I talked, I gradually reduced the number of compliments. I would prompt and when he questioned I would sometimes compliment, but other times I simply smiled before answering. This seemed to be reinforcing enough because he continued questioning me after my prompts.

By Friday night I felt that my program may have been working but I also felt worn out. For five days, I had not simply assaulted Dean with my usual stories but had been working hard devising prompts. Also, I was running out of novel forms of reinforcement. Finally, even if Dean were unaware of all my efforts, he seemed to only be asking questions because of my efforts and then only in my presence. So, I had decided to give up and just get used to Dean's way of thinking.

Late on Sunday, when I returned home, I saw the light on my answering machine blinking. I pressed play and listened to Dean, "Hi, it's me. Sorry I missed you. I was just calling to see how your weekend went. Call me later." I was curious, did this mean that my program had worked? Or was it just a 'random' request?

I returned his call and got my answer, or rather, my question. After saying hello, he immediately asked about my weekend. Since then, the questions have continued. I always knew that Dean was interested in my life. It turns out that he needed a little prompting.