

Chapter 1

**BRIBES ... in the Form
of Sprinkles?**



Her hand floundered around the nightstand like a fish fresh out of water in search of the source for that horribly repetitive blaring sound. Finally, a forceful smack silenced the offending alarm clock. The noise stopped and abrupt silence followed. “There is a God!” she thought as she gathered her bearings. This morning was just like all the others and, after 15 years, she knew the drill: She’d hear the alarm. She’d get up. She’d feed the dog, make the coffee, wake their son, turn on the news, and then rush to take her own shower a full half hour before Dave would realize the world had woken up. Sometimes she was jealous of his ability to sleep through what could have been an Amtrak train barreling through their bedroom, but she also knew she didn’t like the guilt that came with a late start in the morning. Anything after 6 AM was late for Cybil, even on the weekends.

But she also learned long ago that making him get up at the same time as her created a very “difficult” Dave. So she let it go, among a long list of other things that she ceased to worry about for her own sanity. It was her way of dealing with that difficulty, and she found that if she didn’t ask much of him, the difficulty seemed to disappear, at least any that was expressed verbally. What went on in her head continued to be another story, but it just never

seemed to bother Dave. She was the complete opposite of him, but he took it all in stride and loved her despite the times she treated other people in a way that he just couldn't imagine behaving.

As they did every morning, the voices in her head loudly told her to "look good under pressure" and "never let 'em see you sweat!" They swirled around as she thought of her to-do list and the international client e-mails that would have arrived during the night. Today was also the day she had to introduce the trainer for their full-day training class, "How to Make Difficult People Disappear." She truly believed the trainer was good, capable, and a good fit. She was funny, talented, and skilled, but Cybil still balked when she'd encouraged her to attend the class all day.

The irony was that she sometimes felt her mantra was, "I see difficult people," instead of "I see dead people" (from the movie *The Sixth Sense*), and she was pretty sure today would be no exception. Maybe it was because she'd shared her struggles with difficult people with this trainer, or for some other reason that the trainer convinced Cybil she needed to be in the class as an example to her team. She made it a point to emphasize how much value her attendance would have on the leadership in the organization, not to mention how much she would enjoy finding out how to make all those difficult people disappear.

"Why can't I just introduce you, leave, and come back at lunch?" she'd nearly pleaded in the early meetings, while trying to sound merely curious.

"It will work much better if you're there, Cybil. Otherwise, they'll get the impression this is nothing more than

the campaign of the week. They won't do anything differently afterward. Besides, you and I both know that without rewards to entice them or consequences to deter them, people will do whatever is easiest for them. Do you remember that diagram I drew for you?" (See Figure 1.1.)

That was true. The leadership team always starts out with good intentions, but then, to reinforce the behavior, they have to provide continued feedback when people are getting off track.

The trainer continued, "Your being there and reinforcing the principles with your behavior will set up a reward-and-consequence system, of sorts. They'll get positive feedback from you if they do what they learn in class and negative feedback if you see them not doing what was taught in class. If you don't attend, you'll send the subtle message that it really doesn't apply to you or that you don't support it. Isn't there already enough us-versus-them behavior going on around here?"

"Okay, that makes sense. I'll be there," Cybil said, knowing the trainer was right, but it wouldn't be easy. She felt like the *us* in that "us-against-them" phrase was really "them against her" on some days.

Oh, the things she did for these people! The sacrifices she made for this team in trying to change, mold, modify, and grow! Why didn't they all just get it? Like now! Why did the people she led seem to need so much hand-holding from her? *"Just do your job! Get it done and stop the whining!"* she thought. Then again, she also knew most of them worked hard. A lot had changed in the industry, and some team members resented it and were acting out.

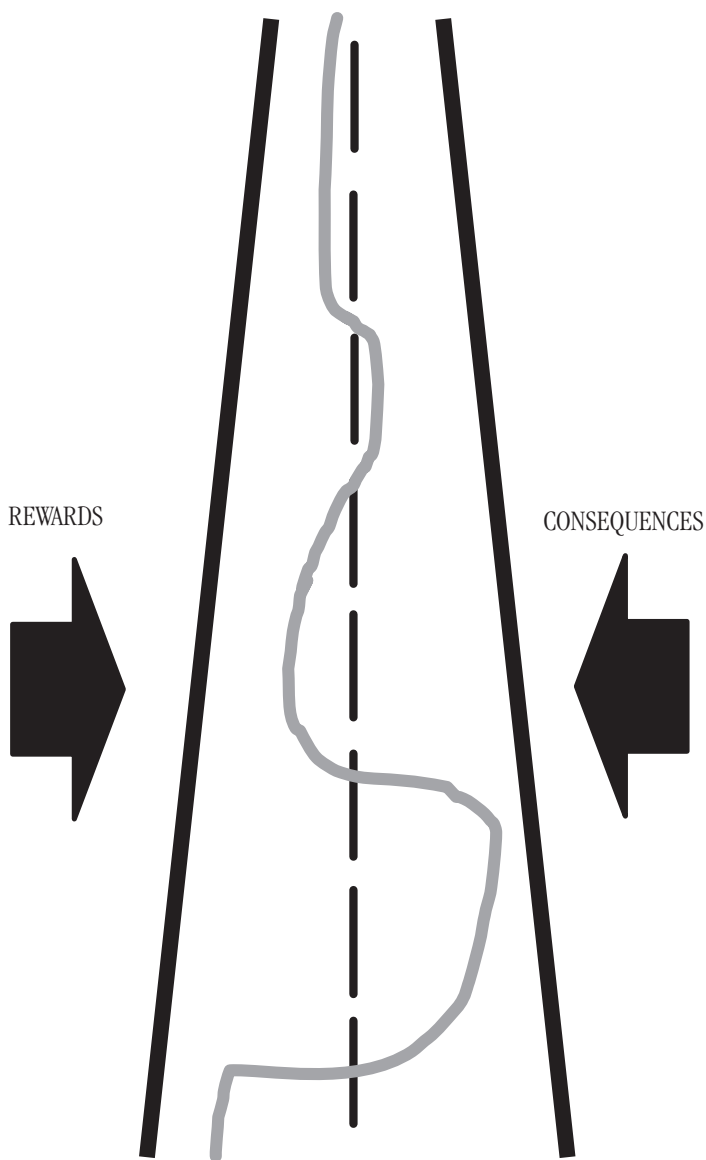


Figure 1.1 Rewards and Consequences to Motivate Performance

Some of them had become difficult, and she had shared as much with the trainer in their first meeting. She mentioned that she had a team member who was consistently negative and that no matter her best efforts to bond, be chatty, or build a rapport with this person, he seemed to walk around with a black cloud hanging over him.

She was running out of ideas for how to handle his sullen behavior. When during their first conversation the trainer gave her immediately applicable advice to combat the problem, Cybil decided to bring her in to train the entire team. The trainer told her to stop habitually saying “Hello, how are you?” to certain stressed-out people whom she knew would always answer negatively. Instead, the trainer suggested that she “just say hello and walk away.” This little piece of advice made Cybil laugh out loud. How could something so simple make any difference? But she began to try this approach, and somehow, instead of her morning being filled with the 10 minutes of negative feedback she braced for daily, that difficulty disappeared.

The upcoming class was going to address this issue and others, while combining both a serious note and a sense of humor. As the trainer had told her, adults learn better when they’re laughing. Based on how easy it had been for Cybil to put into practice a simple step that made her laugh loudly, she was convinced that was true. This class was the right thing to do, even if she still thought she’d regret a day of precious time away from her other work.

By the time Cybil finished her shower, where her brain continued to work overtime with no regard for her lack of a pen and paper, she’d only added four things to her

to-do list. She used a notepad she kept in the bathroom for just such occasions (and secretly wished somebody would invent an underwater writing pad). As she wrote the last item, she heard Dave rustling to life. *Finally*, she thought. Ben arrived then, standing in the doorway, one eye open with arms stretched wide somewhere between a yawn and a contorted yoga pose.

“Hey, Mom?”

“Yeeeessss?” Cybil was always a little fearful of what the question would be at this hour in this morning.

“Did you bake the cookies last night?”

Her hand gripped the pen a bit more tightly. “*Cookies? What cookies?*” she thought. “*Did I bake cookies? What did I do last night? Wait, what’s today? Did he tell me he needed me to bake cookies? Today?!*”

Her mind raced around looking for an answer that would work, but all of them sounded pathetic.

“I’m sorry . . . beg your pardon?” she replied, hoping maybe she misunderstood and he was talking about a girl named Cookie. Heaven forbid. Ben was only eight years old. But since she didn’t remember baking any cookies, it was worth a try to find another possibility before she flipped out.

“The cookies for the bake sale today. The one that’s gonna help us raise money for the animal shelter?” he sighed and mimicked the expression of the big-eyed Puss in Boots cat from the movies.

“You forgot, didn’t you?”

“Can’t I just give you money, Ben? I’m sorry, buddy, I don’t remember you asking me to bake cookies, but I am

more than happy to make a donation directly to the animal shelter. Did you *tell* me you needed me to bake cookies?” Cybil was trying to sound like a concerned mom, but she realized she sounded more like a businesswoman trying to delegate.

Ben was such a charmer and so full of love, emotion, enthusiasm, and energy, but his attention span was the size of a tattoo on a gnat’s behind. She knew it was highly likely and frankly probable that he forgot to tell her and that, somewhere between leaving the school building and getting into the car yesterday, he had completely forgotten about the cookies. It would not have been a surprise, and this wouldn’t be the first time it had happened. Still, in her mind, good moms baked cookies. So this morning, she’d have to manage a workable solution and then later deal with the guilt of being a mom who worked long hours and missed these kinds of things.

“Yes, Mom, remember? I texted you yesterday.”

He was right. It wasn’t generous notice for cookie baking, but it was notice. She had completely forgotten the message that came in between a conference call, an interview, and an instant message from her boss. Cybil, master multitasker, had forgotten the message from her cute son who just needed some cookies. Surely June Cleaver wouldn’t have missed that message. Heck, she didn’t even work outside the house *or* have a phone *or* a boss! But what kind of mother puts an interview before her son? Oh boy. That was a conversation for her to have in her head another day. The reality was that she was a good parent, just really busy and sometimes unable to get it all done, including all

she expected of herself. It really bothered her when things like this happened. And it stressed her out for the rest of the day. Who knew guilt had so much power?

“Mooooooooooooom?” he asked, breaking the still silence, as she was contemplating a solution.

“Ben, I didn’t bake the cookies and I completely forgot your message yesterday. I’m sorry, bud, but I’ll take you to school this morning and we’ll stop by our favorite bakery and pick up some cookies for the bake sale and maybe even a treat for you. Does that sound like a plan?”

She hated to use a bribe, but sometimes a treat smoothed the disappointment. Unfortunately, though, no treat was going to soothe the fact that the bakery trip would make her late for her 8 AM meeting at the office.

“Oh, wow! Okay. Can I get the ones with the special sprinkles on top? That’ll be so cool! My cookies will be so much cooler than everyone else’s! Awesome!” and off he went. Crisis averted. She had gone from “cookie monster” to “cool cookie mom” in a matter of moments. The next fire drill would be the call to her boss about the meeting and whatever excuse she could make up for being late. She wondered whether this one would be that easy and whether her boss might respond the same way if she mentioned “sprinkles.” The positioning or maneuvering of things seemed to be one of her specialties.

To save time, her normally “big hair” went into an elegant clip, and within minutes of the cookie news she walked down the hall in search of Ben’s choice for today’s wild outfit. Bake sale or not, he was not allowed to wear some of his outfit choices in public. Hopefully, he had

chosen something that would bore her instead of bowl her over with laughter.

After outfit inspection, a quick meal of peanut butter and toast, and a kiss on the cheek to her freshly showered husband (who always seemed to be perplexed at the whirlwind Cybil created), they hopped in the car and headed to the bakery. As they pulled out of the driveway, she thought it would have been nice if Dave had made them breakfast instead of sleeping late.

As he watched them drive away, Dave thought it would have been nice if he'd let her wake up in peace instead of faced with the tornado in her brain that she seemed to consistently create and feel compelled to share.

She called her boss and gave a creative, but not completely untrue, reason for her tardiness. She said she needed to handle a family issue that, if not handled appropriately, would create a problem for the rest of her week. In her usual fashion, she turned an emotional issue into one that made logical sense. Her boss agreed that it was the right thing for her to do. He was a husband and a father, and though he was not by any means a fluffy, warm, touchy-feely man, Cybil knew how to approach him with logic and reason. It usually worked, and she could only hope the rest of the day would allow her to focus and get a few things done.

She was focusing on her office tasks, when bright shiny lights appeared behind her.

"You have got to be kidding me," she whispered as she made her way to the left shoulder within a block of the bakery. License and registration in hand, she hit the window button and nearly hung it out the window for the officer.

“Ma’am. Do you know why I pulled you over?”

“Honestly, I have no idea, but I’m sure you had a great reason. I’m on the way to Beth’s Bakery and my son needs cookies and I have an 8 AM meeting and I’m running a little late this morning. Lots to do, but I’ll try to be more careful, Officer. I am in a rush, so if you don’t mind us working through this quickly, I’d appreciate it.”

Sometimes she stunned even herself with her no-fear, get-it-done approach. Did she really just essentially tell an officer to make it snappy? Good grief.

“Well ma’am. If you’ll give me a few minutes I’ll see what I can do. Certainly, you’re ‘hurry’ constitutes a need for driving 50 in a 35-mile-per-hour zone, and those cookies are one high priority. But I’m not sure they would hold up as a defense if you had an accident and hurt someone.” There was just the slightest hint of sarcasm in his voice, and he talked at the speed of cold molasses being poured out of a jar. Ben’s eyes were wide, and he was fascinated by the interaction.

“Well, hi there, young man. Are you the source of this urgent need for cookies?”

She thought, *“Really? Do I look like a woman who has time to socialize? Just write me the ticket or let me go, and let’s get this show on the road.”* Fortunately, she knew when to keep her mouth shut . . . most of the time.

“We’re going to get cookies with sprinkles and sell them at the bake sale to raise money for the animal shelter next to school! Do you have any animals at home? We used to have a cat, but she died. She was 23 years old!”

“Wow, that was some cat. I have a dog, but he doesn’t eat cookies with sprinkles.” They laughed, and by this time, Cybil’s fingers began to tap the steering wheel as she contemplated walking to the bakery with Ben while Grandpa took his time in assessing her fine or processing her alleged offense.

The officer walked back to his car and, after what seemed like a mild eternity, returned with a warning. His reasoning was that he wasn’t going to be the one who stood in the way of sprinkles that helped animals. Clearly, Ben had won his heart, as he did with everyone he met. Cybil admired her son’s people skills and was grateful for one less thing to do later. She thanked the officer and tried not to speed off the shoulder like Mario Andretti on the way to the bakery.

The line at the bakery stretched out the door and seemed only to serve as a further test to Cybil’s delicate patience. They stood in line and stood in line and stood in line after finding the only remaining parking space, which seemed a mile from the door. What was the deal this morning? Was everyone against her getting to the office and being productive? Clearly, she was still seeing difficult people. She was tempted to bribe the two women in front of them, but she didn’t carry cash and didn’t think sprinkles would work for them. Clearly, her rational and objective skills were waning.

Cybil tried not to rush Ben’s decision when they reached the counter, and she counted to 10 a dozen times as the clerk made three mistakes and had to find a manager to help her with a bar code.

“I’m so sorry, ma’am. These are a new item and I’m fairly new myself.”

“Of course you are,” she muttered, perhaps less than silently.

Had she been able to slow the car down and let Ben jump out, she would have. She loved her son, yet this morning was getting to be a bit ridiculous, and she wasn’t laughing. She always felt that she could let far more slide at home than she could at work. At work, she’d have had no tolerance for this kind of thing and would have long ago lost it. She had that reputation, and she’d never been able to figure out why she couldn’t just relax about things, or at least suppress them better at work, as she could at home. It was more than the fact that she loved her son and husband. She seemed literally to be two different people. One at home and one at work, and she wasn’t sure which one took more energy to maintain, but she did know she was drained at the end of days like this. And many of her days were like this for one reason or another.

She pulled up to the school, kissed Ben, wished him luck on his bake sale, and tried not to rush his good-bye. He started to tell her a story about some project they were starting today, but she had to gently ask him to tell her later. The door closed and she was off. It was now 8:15, and traffic would make her office arrival before 8:45 a near impossibility.

She arrived at the office already exhausted and exasperated, but still outwardly composed, and saw her boss in the hall next to her office. His first gesture was to look

at his watch and then at her. It was 8:45 and the class was to begin at 9:00.

“I’d prefer we try to meet at lunch if that works for you.” He said with a bit of authority.

“I think that would be more effective, and I apologize, John. I had a few challenges this morning.”

“Seems that way. We need to work on this project, but it can wait until lunch. By the way, the trainer is here and some of our folks are in the room already. Are you introducing her or am I?”

“I’ll take care of it. In fact, I think she sent me her introduction. Let me get that, and I’ll see you at lunchtime. I think we break at noon, and the food is already handled. Becca can coordinate all of that.”

John nodded and strode down the hall, wondering when Cybil was going to stop “dealing with him” and just be herself. He wasn’t sure what she always seemed to be guarding against, but he did know that it was hindering her ability to build rapport and trust on her team. She had such potential, if she could just let down the shield and sword and be a bit more approachable.

Cybil found the introduction, printed it out just before the low-toner light came on and did her best to nonchalantly stroll into the class, realizing that her intake of morning coffee and water were telling her she needed a detour. There was a full room of her teammates and participants from other departments, and she found the trainer at the front of the room. She shook the trainer’s hand, appreciating the warm smile that seemed to acknowledge Cybil’s

frazzled start to the day, and took her cue when the trainer said, “I’m ready when you are.”

The introduction was short and to the point, with a bit of humor that Cybil tried to deliver well, but thought she could have done better. “*Oh well,*” she thought, “*at least that part’s done.*” She settled into a chair in the back of the room and began to check her BlackBerry as the trainer began.

What she said caught her by surprise, as did the laughter from the rest of the room. It was something about being contagious and how attitudes are contagious and then a phrase that really caught Cybil’s attention.

“Today, we’ll look at those whom you work with and determine who’s difficult and who’s just different. We’ll work on communicating with each person in a way they understand and in a way that, frankly, allows you to lead folks in a way that will encourage team members to stay longer, produce more, and complain less. The first place we want to start, though, is with your own ability to lead yourself. In my humble opinion, you must be able to first be yourself, and then lead yourself well, before you really have any business leading other people. So, let’s start with *you*. Would you believe that most of our own leadership starts with the voices in our heads? In fact, who in here talks to themselves?”

Almost every hand in the room went up, and Cybil’s BlackBerry found a spot on the table. She was intrigued and, at a minimum, thought this was going to be interesting. At least that is what the voices in her head said.

Of course, at this point, the voices were also saying, “Is it just me, or is everyone out there difficult?” She briefly

thought through the events of her morning. Between her husband, her son, the clerk at the bakery, the cop, her boss, and an incoming e-mail from China she had briefly seen, she was surprised she had actually managed to get something as simple as a cup of coffee without causing a problem that again slowed her down or presented itself as difficult. Was it a worldwide problem that everyone was either being purposely difficult, moving slowly, showing their stupidity or lack of thought, or was it just her? She began to feel her irritation rising and thought to herself, *"This lady had really better be good!"*

The trainer laughed along with the class when they saw how many talked to themselves. She even joked that we *all* talk to ourselves and that the more important question is usually, "How many voices are talking?"

At least she was funny, Cybil thought.

The trainer continued by asking the group another question.

"In fact, who in here has a voice inside your head that has convinced you that someone you work with is difficult beyond repair?" Very few hands went up, as people looked around the room and appeared to not wish to be known for talking about their colleagues.

"Well," said the trainer, "let me make this easier. Who in here has ever worked with someone, here or at another job, who literally reminded you of Eeyore from *Winnie-the-Pooh*?" This garnered laughter, and she continued.

"You know the type. You say 'Good morning' to this person and, much like the grumpy donkey in *Winnie-the-Pooh*, their only response is, 'What's good about it?'" She

used a tone of voice that reminded Cybil so much of the difficult person she and the trainer had talked about, it was almost scary.

“There are going to be people you work with, live with, hang out with, or love who act like this. They will complain about their ice cream being too cold, about rain on a sunny day, or about having to work too hard to get exactly what they want in life—and that’s okay. I want you to immediately think of who these folks are and then imagine, next time you see them, that they’ve just come into the office, gone to their proverbial locker, taken out their Eeyore suit, unzipped it, stepped into it, and are now walking around with two ears and a tail all day long!” The room burst into laughter at the visual, and she definitely had their attention.

So far, the trainer hadn’t made any difficult people disappear, but in the first 15 minutes she had connected with the class and engaged the room. It was working, and it made Cybil believe that whatever this woman would say just might not land on deaf ears, unlike what she herself had tried to do for months.

It also sounded like there were going to be some applicable tools that all of them could use to make difficult people, or at least their perception of them as difficult, disappear, without having to go to jail and without Cybil having to bribe them all with sprinkles.

For videos and more information that will enhance what you’ve learned in this chapter, go to: www.MakeDifficultPeopleDisappear.com.