

Motivational Punishment: Beaten by Carrots and Sticks

All too often, incentive programs fail to produce the desired behaviors, much less the desired results. Even some managers who feel they have succeeded learn that they inadvertently have created new problems while trying to solve old ones. Obviously, the traditional wisdom in this field either is flawed or the application of it is an incredibly slippery slope. To some extent, both of these are true. So, should we abandon incentives and rewards for safety or look for alternatives?

There are few endeavors in which intelligent and well-intentioned professionals more regularly fail than in the implementation of incentives and rewards for safety.

In 1993, Alfie Kohn wrote his famous book, *Punished by Rewards*, in which he advocated abandoning incentives and rewards. He illustrated his conclusions with case studies and research pointing out the limitations of carrots dangling from sticks and traditional approaches to motivation. Many organizations used this as an excuse to cut the incentives column off the company expense report. The result of doing so predictably was de-motivating.

More recent studies and interpretations, like those in Daniel Pink's new book, *Drive*, suggest that traditional motivation works best on well-defined and simple (algorithmic) tasks and actually inhibits performance tasks that require more thinking or problem solving (heuristic). This dichotomy might suggest a new guideline for traditional motivational theories and help us to use them where they will have the greatest impact.

Like Kohn, Pink suggests that contingent incentives create the most serious problems. Researchers refer to contingent motivation (if you do ___ you will get ___) as "incentives," whereas motivation given after the desired act (and not

mentioned before) are called "rewards." If you use this definition, almost all typical problems occur with incentives. Kohn basically dismissed the whole theory of incentives as invalid, whereas Pink qualifies where they might work and where they should be used with caution.

The difficulties with incentives include the following:

- If the item you choose to provide for an incentive (cash, gift, recognition, etc.) is not viewed as valuable by the recipient, then motivation usually won't occur.
- If the item is too valuable, it can promote cheating (such as pencil-whipping).
- The process might get the workers to do the right thing for the wrong reason.
- Extrinsic incentives can increase the frequency of behavior while actually decreasing the intrinsic motivation, leading to an "I have to, rather than a "I want to" mentality.
- Regularly given incentives can become entitlements and lose the ability to incent.
- Incentives can become addictive, requiring larger and larger doses to create the desired motivation.
- Qualifying for the "prize" can discourage reporting.
- If used for creative or cognitive tasks, incentives actually can diminish performance, crush creativity and foster short-term thinking.

ALTERNATIVE APPROACHES

These potential problems with incentives suggest that alternative strategies might be more effectively utilized. The most logical alternative to extra motivational strategies is to build the motivation into the job, rather than add it as another program. More recent research suggests that most workers are motivated to do a good job and that the design of many of those jobs actually dampen their intrinsic motivation. In other words, workers arrive motivated and either their jobs or bosses beat (figuratively, of course) the

motivation out of them.

Designing jobs to be more closely linked with purpose, and carefully removing the common de-motivators, can go a long way toward the goal without additional extrinsic motivational strategies. Adding motivators to the basic design of jobs also can enhance the experience and increase additional motivational opportunities. In his classic book, *SuperMotivation*, Dean Spitzer lists the most common motivators and de-motivators and suggests strategies for structuring jobs to maximize motivation. Just as nutritionists suggest that good meals can provide the proper nutrients without the need for supplements, good jobs can motivate without the need for supplemental motivational programs.

Building the motivation into the job is not the only opportunity. Rewards also are ways to motivate that avoid virtually all of the common pitfalls of incentives. Basically, don't create an "if-then" contingency. Simply ask people to do the right thing for the right reason, and then reward them when they do. The next time you ask them to do the right thing, the memory of past rewards and the anticipation that future rewards may happen becomes a type of incentive, free of the problems of traditional contingency incentives. Additionally, these types of rewards tend to create a culture that celebrates accomplishment. Cultures that can rise to challenges without being "bribed" to do so are the kinds of cultures most organizations desire.

GOING FAR

One such approach currently being implemented is called the FAR process. FAR is an acronym for: focus, achieve and reward. This process has leaders choose a specific opportunity to improve safety and focuses workers on accomplishing this improvement. It is important to allow participants to have input in how the goal is to be accomplished. Pink suggests that autonomy is motivating; Dr. W. Edwards Deming always claimed that, "People support what they help create." Giving workers the opportunity to creatively improve safety is a form of motivation in itself. Rotating opportunities to lead

or participate in safety improvement teams is a key concept in several approaches to safety programs, including OSHA's Voluntary Protection Program (VPP).

The proper focus is crucial in making such efforts successful. Trying to accomplish too much at once can result in frustration and failure. Working on items with low impact can be demotivating if a lot of effort is required to make only a little improvement. The key to proper focus is transformational thinking. What one thing, if improved or done differently, would have the greatest impact on advancing

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safety? What are your transformational opportunities? How many can your team tackle at a time? Working on an attainable project with verifiable results is a great way to inspire and build a capable safety culture at the same time.

Achievement is another step in the process, but it also is a motivational strategy. Pink calls it "mastery," i.e., to bring about an intended result. When your workers overcome a safety challenge or take advantage of a safety-improvement opportunity, they "master" safety. This mastery is a high form of motivational strategy and an opportunity to publicize success and celebrate accomplishment. Cultures that have success at their core require very little extrinsic motivation. Winning is a motivational strategy.

Rewarding victory is more of a symbolic than monetary task. Think of the trinkets that are given to athletes and performers when they win: ribbons, trophies, cups, statuettes. These items often have more value as a symbol of accomplishment than as

a commodity. Regular items of value can be used as rewards and often are appreciated, but failing to award them symbolic value may be a lost opportunity. Clothing or utility items can be inscribed with safety symbols or memorabilia about the specific accomplishment for which they were given. For the symbols to have lasting impact, place them on items workers will keep at work, rather than take home or to their cars.

Many organizations using the FAR process celebrate their successes. Experts seem divided on the wisdom of this practice, though they argue more about what should be celebrated than about the celebration itself. Celebrating based on lagging indicators over which workers have little control can be ineffective and demotivating. But celebrating the wins of teams who are focused on leading indicators over which they do have control, or gain new levels of control, is a different matter. Celebrations, like rewards, need to be carefully aimed at the right targets to motivate the right behaviors.

If you have struggled with incentives, you are not alone, and there is help available. To develop an effective motivational strategy for safety improvement, consider revising the structure of jobs to maximize motivation. Utilize Dean Spitzer's list of motivators and de-motivators or Daniel Pink's trio of strategies: autonomy, mastery and purpose. If that is not sufficient, utilize the FAR process to supplement motivation. Even though motivation for safety is difficult, it is much too valuable and important to abandon. **EHS**



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