

Tea Leaves to Rewards: Understanding the Art of Timing in Employee Incentive Programs

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Hazards are ever-present in the steel plant environment, and a heightened awareness and emphasis on safety is a necessary priority for our industry. This monthly column, coordinated by members of the AIST Safety & Health Technology Committee, focuses on procedures and practices to promote a safe working environment for everyone.

What can brewing the perfect cup of tea teach us about the importance of timing with incentives and rewards?

My corporate career began in an engineering firm in England. Several times throughout the day, the responsibility to refill everyone's tea rotated throughout the department. What yielded the perfect cup of tea was an unintended reward from my work in this firm.

Setting up or distributing incentives and rewards is much like serving a perfectly brewed cup of tea. Just as timing is crucial in steeping tea to achieve the ideal flavor, aroma, and richness, the timing of incentives and rewards significantly impacts their effectiveness.

If the tea leaves are steeped for too short a time, the tea lacks depth and fails to capture the full essence of the blend. Similarly, if incentives are introduced prematurely, they may not fully resonate with the employees or fail to yield the desired impact.

Conversely, when tea is steeped for too long, it can become bitter and overwhelming, losing its nuanced flavor. Similarly, delayed or poorly timed incentives may lose their motivational impact and be met with diminished enthusiasm.

Much like the art of brewing the perfect cup of tea, the timing of incentives and rewards plays a significant role in determining the effectiveness of such measures in influencing behavior and performance. This importance of

timing is highlighted in a recent incident we encountered.

An organization successfully reduced the impact of its safety incentives by delaying the payment. Surprisingly, the workers acknowledged that it finally arrived just when they had given up hope of receiving their reward. Psychology and behavioral science have long emphasized the significance of timing reinforcement. The closer the reward is given to the desired behavior, the more powerful its influence on performance becomes. On the contrary, if the reward is delayed, its impact weakens significantly. Therefore, delivering rewards and incentives promptly is imperative to maximize their effectiveness.

In cases where an organization is unable to pay rewards on time, it is advisable to adjust the promise date to align with the ability to calculate and pay the bonus. By doing so, the organization can avoid the negative consequences of delayed rewards and maintain the desired level of motivation and performance.

Several important factors must be considered when announcing or giving incentives and rewards. These considerations can greatly impact the effectiveness and impact of the rewards on employee behavior and motivation.

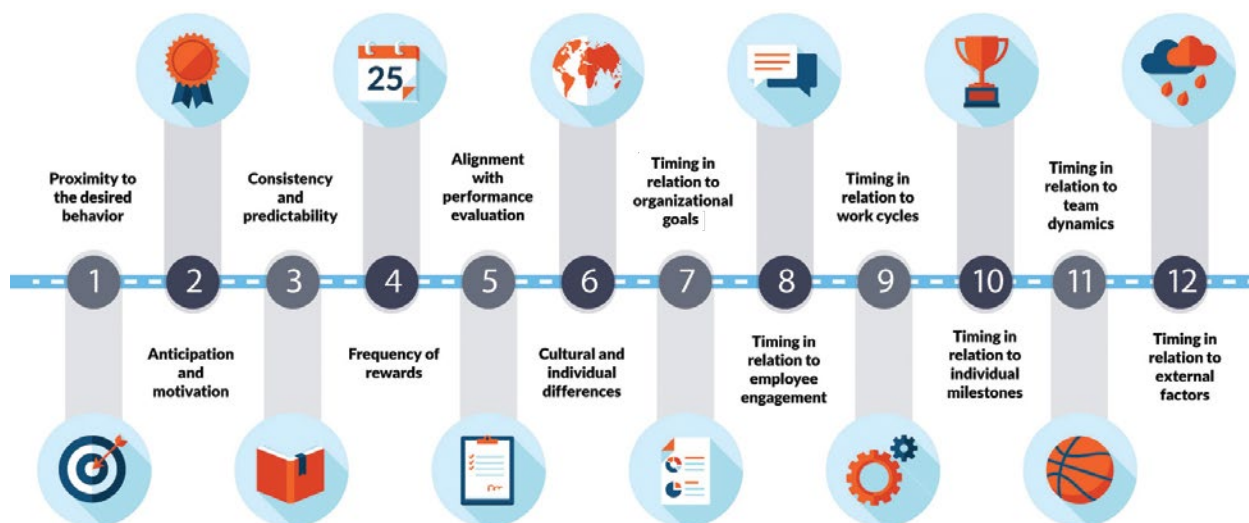
1. Proximity to the desired behavior: The closer the reward is given to the desired behavior, the more

Comments are welcome.

If you have questions about this topic or other safety issues, please contact safetyfirst@aist.org. Please include your full name, company name, mailing address and email in all correspondence.

Figure 1

Factors to consider.



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1. Proximity to the desired behavior: It is important to announce or give the reward as soon as possible after the desired behavior has been exhibited. This ensures that the reward is directly linked to the behavior and reinforces its importance.
2. Anticipation and motivation: Timing can be used strategically to create a sense of employee anticipation and motivation. Announcing rewards in advance builds excitement and encourages employees to strive for the reward. However, it is important to strike a balance and not create excessively long delays, as this can lead to demotivation.
3. Consistency and predictability: Consistency in the timing of rewards is essential. Employees should be able to rely on the organization to deliver rewards as promised. If the timing of rewards is inconsistent or unpredictable, it can lead to frustration and a loss of trust. Therefore, it is important to establish a reliable schedule for announcing and giving rewards.
4. Frequency of rewards: The frequency of rewards can also impact their effectiveness. Regular, consistent rewards can provide ongoing motivation and reinforcement. However, if rewards are given too frequently, their impact may diminish over time. Finding the right balance between regularity and occasional surprises can help maintain the effectiveness of rewards.
5. Alignment with performance evaluation: The timing of rewards should align with the evaluation of performance. It is important to announce or give rewards after performance evaluations are conducted, ensuring they are based on objective criteria. This helps maintain fairness and transparency in the reward system.
6. Cultural and individual differences: Cultural and individual differences should also be considered when determining the timing of rewards. Different cultures may have different expectations and preferences regarding the timing of rewards. Additionally, individual employees may have different needs and preferences, so it is important to consider these factors when determining the timing of rewards.
7. Timing in relation to organizational goals: The timing of incentives and rewards should align with the organization's goals and objectives. For example, if the organization is focused on increasing short-term participation in a safety activity during a specific period, it may be beneficial to introduce participation-related incentives and rewards during that time to maximize motivation and performance.
8. Timing in relation to employee engagement: The timing of incentives and rewards should consider the level of employee engagement. If employees are already highly engaged and motivated, introducing incentives and rewards at the right time can further enhance their performance. On the other hand, if employee engagement is low, introducing incentives and rewards at the wrong time may have little to no impact.
9. Timing in relation to work cycles: Consideration should be given to the timing of incentives and rewards in relation to work cycles. For
10. Timing in relation to individual milestones: Consideration should be given to the timing of incentives and rewards in relation to individual milestones.
11. Timing in relation to team dynamics: Consideration should be given to the timing of incentives and rewards in relation to team dynamics.
12. Timing in relation to external factors: Consideration should be given to the timing of incentives and rewards in relation to external factors.

example, if there are peak periods or busy seasons where employees are under high pressure, it may be more effective to introduce incentives and rewards after those periods to provide a sense of relief and recognition for their efforts.

10. Timing in relation to individual milestones: Recognizing and rewarding employees for reaching significant milestones in their careers or personal development can be highly motivating. The timing of these rewards should coincide with the achievement of these milestones to maximize their impact and provide a sense of accomplishment and progress.
11. Timing in relation to team dynamics: Incentives and rewards can also be used strategically to foster collaboration and teamwork. Timing the introduction of team-based rewards when the team is working on a specific project or facing a particular challenge can enhance camaraderie and encourage collective effort.
12. Timing in relation to external factors: External factors, such as industry trends, market conditions, or economic factors, can also influence the timing of incentives and rewards. For example, if the organization is undergoing a period of growth or facing intense competition, introducing incentives and rewards at the right time can motivate

employees to seize opportunities and contribute to the organization's success.

The art of brewing the perfect cup of tea teaches us valuable lessons about the importance of timing in the world of incentives and rewards. Just as steeping tea for too short or too long can result in a lack of depth or a bitter flavor, the timing of incentives and rewards significantly impacts their effectiveness. Delivering rewards promptly, closely linking them to the desired behavior, and considering individual and cultural differences are crucial factors to consider. Timing can also be used strategically to create anticipation and motivation, align with organizational goals, and foster teamwork and collaboration.

Consistency, fairness and transparency in the timing of rewards are essential to maintain trust and motivation among employees. Additionally, the reward frequency should balance regularity and occasional surprises to maintain their impact over time. By carefully considering these factors, organizations can maximize the impact and effectiveness of their reward systems. Just as a perfectly brewed cup of tea brings satisfaction and pleasure, well-timed incentives and rewards can enhance employee behavior and motivation and ultimately contribute to the organization's success. ♦

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