

A Lasting Impact: Organizational Influences Encourage Safe Behaviors

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In the recent flurry of theories about the pros and cons of safety rewards and incentives, the most serious danger has escaped our attention. Dan Pink's recent book, *Drive*, renewed the debate and drove many of us to re-read Alphonse Kohn's infamous work, *Punished By Rewards*. Both the proponents and critics of safety incentives can cite details in which such programs work, or don't. But the debate has missed the most critical danger in such systems: the failure to identify and address organizational influences on behavior.

The focus of the recent discussions has centered on the difference between intrinsic and extrinsic motivators. Pink argues that many extrinsic motivators replace, rather than enhance, intrinsic motivators. Replacing intrinsic motivators can get people to do the right thing, but for the wrong reason. Losing intrinsic motivation for safety can reduce it from a charity to a "for-profit" enterprise. Workers practice safe behaviors, but their influence is the reward they will receive rather than a true desire to care for themselves and their fellow workers.

Proponents of safety incentives argue that this is not necessarily true, and they cite examples of incentives and rewards that actually enhance intrinsic motivation. It is undeniable that incentives decrease creative thinking and that incentivizing teachers does NOT increase their student's test scores. People working on creative problem solving actually perform more slowly when incentivized. Incentives and rewards work best on routine tasks that happen repetitively.

It is equally arguable that pink Cadillacs have helped Mary Kay to motivate its salespeople to reach new levels. Safety tokens that can be redeemed for merchandise have been shown to increase certain safety behaviors that impact accidents. The question remains whether or not the behavioral change is permanent. That is best determined by whether or not the behavior sustains after the reward or incentive is removed.

The problem with both sides of these arguments is that they ignore why the behavior currently exists and what influences it. Behavior persists in an organization because it is influenced by various factors. These factors include perceptions of risk, habits, obstacles, and barriers to doing the job safely. Identifying and changing these influences can change behaviors for current and future employees. Changing influences tends to change behaviors at the cultural level and such changes become sustainable long-term. Incentives and rewards can act like a tonic that simply masks the symptoms (behaviors) rather than attacking the cause (organizational influences).

Changing a behavior through a bribe is, at best, a band-aid solution. The underlying influences that have shaped the behavior are still hard at work in the organization and will compete with the reward or incentive. Since incentives and rewards have a propensity to be addictive, it will take increased doses to continue to overcome the unaddressed influences over time. This is good news if you sell rewards. It's not so good if you are using these rewards to counter the organizational influences with generations of new workers.

Behavioral scientists have been telling organizations for decades that their safety performance is a direct result of the influences within their company. This is a message that is not well received by many organizational leaders who had good intentions. It is hard to realize that the incentive to "not have

accidents" actually resulted in "non-reporting", or that the well-intentioned accident investigation form actually encouraged blame avoidance rather than an honest dialogue on how to prevent accidents. But such discoveries are the doorway to future improvements.

It is not prudent to reward employees for behaviors that organizational influences discourage or punish. It is only necessary to change the influences. Adding a reward for a safe behavior while ignoring the influences that reinforce risk-taking is a formula for future problems. The difficulty with this approach in most organizations is that they don't do a good job of identifying and addressing the influences of at-risk behaviors.

The key to identifying these influences is often as simple as asking, "Why?" Rather than jumping to either rewards or punishment, first seek to understand the influences. When managers or supervisors observe workers taking risks or failing to take precautions, their first impulse is often to take the role of a safety cop and correct the problem on the spot. However, years of habit or underlying organizational influences are often at work and are not going to change with a simple admonition or slap on the hand. The impulse to intervene needs to be replaced with the intent to understand. Once the influences are understood, they can often be addressed at the organizational level. Such solutions have more cultural and lasting impacts on behaviors than either rewards or punishments.

The basic model of performance management asks four questions:

1. What do you want people to do? (The answer needs to be defined in behavioral terms.)
2. How do you communicate the desired behavior to the workforce? (Remember that communication is a process, not an event.)
3. What happens if they do it? (The answer should include positive reinforcement, but not necessarily rewards.)
4. What happens if they don't? (Express concern, discover why (influences), and address the organizational reinforcers.)

This approach aligns organizational influences to shape the behaviors of the whole workforce, not just those you see and reward. It works even when you are not looking and shapes safety culture in a natural and lasting way. When you reward, you send the message that you are willing to pay for safe behaviors. When you align your organization to reinforce safe behaviors, you send a message that safety is the way we do things around here.