

# "Can People Really Be Motivated?"

By Dave Blum

There's an old story that goes like this:

"An elderly man has endured the insults of a crowd of ten-year-olds each day as they passed his house on their way home from school. One afternoon, after listening to another round of jeers about how stupid and ugly and bald he was, the man came up with a plan. He met the children on his lawn the following Monday and announced that anyone who came back the next day and yelled rude comments about him would receive a dollar. Amazed and excited, they showed up even earlier on Tuesday, hollering epithets for all they were worth. True to his word, the old man ambled out and paid everyone. 'Do the same tomorrow,' he told them, 'and you'll get twenty-five cents for your trouble.' The kids thought that was still pretty good and turned out again on Wednesday to taunt him. At the first catcall, he walked over with a roll of quarters and again paid off his hecklers. 'From now on,' he announced, 'I can give you only a penny for doing this.' The kids looked at each other in disbelief. 'A penny?' they repeated scornfully. 'Forget it!' And they never came back again."

(Alfie Kohn, *Punished by Rewards - The Trouble with Gold Stars, Incentive Plans, A's, Praise, and Other Bribes*, 1993, Houghton Mifflin, pg. 71-72)

How do we motivate people? How do we de-motivate people? In the story above, the sly old man successfully turned the kids away from their favorite after-school activity - senior citizen baiting - by first incentivizing the process, and then gradually diminishing the rewards. What had, for the kids, originally been a fun and intrinsically motivating endeavor became something they were now doing for extrinsic, monetary gain. When the cash stopped, so did they. The question that begs to be answered here is, "What actually neutralized the children's motivation – the incremental reduction of the prize, or the fact that a prize (any prize) had been introduced at all?"

Alfie Kohn explores this question and more in his fascinating work, *Punished by Rewards* (which I'll discuss more below). As in his previous book, *No Contest-the Case Against Competition*, 1986 (which I reviewed in the June/July Dr. Clue Newsletter), Kohn's conclusions are always well-researched, always controversial, and always very much worth examining. In the beginning (of our economic era), writes Kohn, there was the word, and that word was "behaviorism." As advocated by psychologist B.F. Skinner, behaviorism preached the message that "the best way to get someone to do something was to provide a reward when they do it the way you want them to." Or, as Kohn summarizes it, "Do this and you'll get that." Behaviorism has so permeated American culture that we no longer question its validity. It is simply a given that "Do this and you'll get that" is the logical way to raise children, teach students, and manage employees. Whether it's a teacher awarding stickers, stars and certificates to her students, or a parent promising an ice cream to a child if she makes her bed, or a manager offering incentive trips to the department's top employees, what they all have in common is a belief that external rewards lead to increased motivation. But are rewards right, just and respectful? And more significantly, do rewards, prizes, and incentives actually work?

To answer the first question, Kohn asserts that rewards are, by their very nature, unjust and dehumanizing. Those who wield rewards assume that people are like pets - easily and necessarily manipulated by the promise of treats. They take it as fact that people are inherently passive and unmotivated and can only be roused into action by the dangling of goodies. Rewards are

necessary, according to this argument, because people are lazy; if incentives also tend to be calculating and controlling, then so be it. In Kohn's words: "There is no getting around the fact that the basic purpose of merit pay is manipulative" (pg 26). The boss is seen as a father figure whom you must please in order to receive rewards. The person at the reins, controlling the incentives, maintains a strong power position over all those below him.

As to the second question, Kohn outlines five reasons why rewards fail, as follows:

- 1) **Rewards Punish** – When a parent says, "If you don't behave, I'll take away tonight's treat," he is both offering a reward and threatening a punishment. Although rewards and punishments may seem like two separate and opposite things, they are, in fact, simply two different sides of the same coin. Implied in every "do this and you'll get that" proposition is the fact that just as rewards can be given, so can they be taken away. Raises and bonuses can be rescinded as well – so you'd better do as the boss says.
- 2) **Rewards Rupture Relationships** – Especially in business, rewards are often associated with competition. Who will be the next Employee-of-the-Month? Who will receive the cash prize for being top-performer? Although motivating in the short-term, rewards like this tend to create a feeling of artificial scarcity. As there are just so many prizes to go around, you may come to see your co-workers as obstacles in the way of your success. Says Kohn, "A good working relationship is characterized by trust, open communication, and the willingness to ask for assistance" (pg. 57). Reward-based recognition systems, with their emphasis on scarce and limited prizes, disrupt such positive working relationships and interfere with the process of collaboration-building and cooperation. In short, an employee with her sights set on becoming top performer is unlikely to ask for help from others or share resources.
- 3) **Rewards Ignore Reasons** – Ask yourself this question: Which is easier – taking the time to find out why a child is acting up, or sending the child to his room? Similarly, which is more expedient – probing for the true sources of low worker motivation, or concocting a newer and more enticing incentive program? Searching for underlying reasons and causes, and bringing about meaningful, long-term change is difficult and time-consuming. Reward-giving is much faster – a quick fix that "masks problems and ignores reasons" (Kohn, pg. 60). The underlying problems, however, continue apace.
- 4) **Rewards Discourage Risk-taking** – Once a goody is dangled, an odd thing happens. Focused now on achieving the prize as quickly as possible, we tend to do exactly what is necessary to attain the reward – and no more. Work, at its best, should be "an open-ended encounter with ideas" (Kohn, pg. 63). Reward-seeking, by contrast, is more like a race for the ring, with risks something to be minimized whenever possible. Writes Kohn, "our objective is not really to succeed at a task at all (in the sense of doing well); it is to succeed at obtaining a reward" (pg. 65). Devoting time and energy to quality work will just slow you down, or so says the argument.
- 5) **Rewards Affect Intrinsic Motivation** – If "extrinsic" motivation can be said to be energy offered from the outside in the form of rewards, prizes, praise, and incentives, what then is "intrinsic motivation?" Kohn sees it as a driving interest in performing a task simply for the sake of the challenge involved. In other words, if we find our jobs interesting, challenging, and meaningful, regardless of the payment involved, it's likely that there's intrinsic motivation at work. Kohn believes that internal motivation is far stronger, and more long-lasting, than the external variety, which he deems "artificial." Intrinsic motivation, however,

tends to be undermined by the imposition of extrinsic incentives. Rewards, argues Kohn, actually decrease our interest in the task at hand, for the following two reasons:

- a) The Bribe Factor – The recipient of a reward will inevitably ask himself, “Why am I being bribed to do this task? It must be something not worth doing for its own sake.” Notes Kohn, “Anything presented...as a means toward some end...comes to be seen as less desirable” (pg. 76).
- b) The Control Factor – Human beings instinctively rebel when they feel they are being controlled. Kohn explains: “Rewards are usually experienced as being controlling, and we tend to recoil from situations where our autonomy has been diminished” (pg. 78).

To summarize then, 1) Rewards punish 2) Rewards rupture relationships 3) Rewards ignore reasons 4) Rewards discourage risk taking and 5) Rewards undermine interest.

### **So what is the alternative?**

Kohn believes that we cannot motivate people extrinsically, for all the reasons outlined above. Nor can we somehow provide people with intrinsic motivation, which needs to be self-generated. We can, however, set up the conditions for intrinsic motivation to develop. We start by abolishing incentives – which isn't to say that people should not be paid a fair wage in alignment with the success of the organization. Because they should. Once the pay rate has been established, though, Kohn advocates putting money and rewards out of people's minds and allowing them to concentrate on the tasks at hand. Here are his three “Cs” for creating the conditions for authentic motivation:

- 1) **Collaboration:** Kohn observes: “People are able to do a better job in well-functioning groups than they can on their own. They are also likely to be more excited about their work” (pg. 188). If you want to inspire intrinsic motivation, provide employees ample opportunities for collaboration. Offer them the chance to work in teams. Encourage the exchange of ideas, resources and talent. And make sure work groups are supported by management.
- 2) **Content:** In a survey of industrial workers from 1946-1986, people were asked what they looked for in a job. “Good wages” was fifth out of ten possible factors. In a more recent survey, interesting work was number one (Kohn, pg. 130). One of the best ways you can inspire intrinsic motivation is by providing employees with stimulating, meaningful tasks – jobs that are relevant and seem to “make a difference.” Offer workers considerable variation in tasks; allow them the opportunity to learn new skills; and let them acquire and demonstrate competence.
- 3) **Choice:** Kohn writes: “We are most likely to become enthusiastic about what we are doing...when we are free to make decisions about the way we carry out a task” (pg. 192). Choice is crucial to the development of intrinsic motivation. So give employees a degree of latitude in how they do their work. Don't lean over their shoulders, commanding and controlling them. Empower people with real choices. And allow them to participate in making substantive decisions regarding the organization.

In a sense, the children at the beginning of the “Old Man Story” possessed all the ingredients of intrinsic motivation: a community of friends, a pleasurable (if negative) activity, and lots of

choice in how they could do it. The Old Man cleverly interrupted all that with the introduction of rewards, de-motivating the kids (to his benefit).

“Motivating” by rewards is easy; restructuring our workplaces to inspire intrinsic motivation is a bit more difficult. Moving away from the “reward-giving-habit,” at home and at work, will take some thought and effort, but as Kohn skillfully demonstrates, it’s certainly worth considering.

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