

Can People Be Really Motivated?

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The title of this article is borrowed from a review by David Blum - who manages a team building company in the US - of a book intriguingly titled: *Punished by Rewards – The Trouble with Gold Stars, Incentive Plans, A's, Praise, and Other Bribes* authored by Alfie Kohn.

The book deals with the way we motivate/de-motivate people. To illustrate, and to prove his contrary views on the subject, author Kohn quotes the following story of an old man:

" An elderly man had endured 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 following 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 was still pretty good and turned out again on Wednesday 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."

In successfully making the kids' turn away from their favorite after-school activity of teasing and jeering him, the sly old man in the story had first incentivized the process, and then gradually diminished the reward. So what for the kids had been a fun and *intrinsically motivating* endeavor became something they were doing for *extrinsic, monetary* gain. When the cash stopped, so did they.

Question: 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?

According to the Western science of Behaviorism (and practiced just as avidly by us Indians), the best way to get someone to do something is to provide a reward when they do it the way you want them to, or simply put, "Do this and you'll get that". This thinking has so permeated our thinking that it is used as a logical process of parenting children; teaching students and also - managing employees. Whether it's a teacher awarding certificates to children, or a parent promising a child some goodie if he does his homework, or a marketing manager dreaming up a trip to an exotic place if the salesman achieves his annual target, what they 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? These are the intriguing questions Kohn poses, and provides answers to, in his book.

In answer to the first question, Kohn's assertion is that rewards are, by their very nature, unjust and dehumanizing. Those who plan and give out rewards – he says - assume that people are like pets – easily and necessarily manipulated by the

promise of treats. They seem to be of the belief that people are basically passive and unmotivated and can only be triggered into action by the dangling of rewards. In other words, according to this argument, rewards are necessary because people are lazy; if incentives 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." 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.

In answer to the second question, Kohn outlines five reasons why rewards fail:

1) **Rewards Punish** – When a parent says, "If you don't behave, I shall not take you to McDonalds over the weekend" 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 two sides of the same coin. The implication in every "Do this and you'll get that," proposition is that just as rewards can be given, they can be taken away. Increments and bonuses can be withdrawn as well – so you had better do as the boss says.

2) **Rewards Rupture Relationships** – Rewards generate competition – especially in business. Although motivating in the short term, rewards like this tend to create a sense of artificial scarcity. With the limited number of prizes going around, employees may see their co-workers as competitors and obstacles in the way of success. Good working relationships are based on trust, open communication and the willingness to ask for assistance. According to Kohn, rewards-based recognition systems disrupt such positive working relationships and interfere with the process of collaboration and cooperation. In short an employee determined to become the star performer is unlikely to ask for help or share resources.

3) **Rewards Ignore Reasons** – Given the choice between taking time to find out why a child is misbehaving and punishing him for his behavior, parents would resort to the latter which is a simpler choice. Similarly, a manager given a choice between probing for the true sources of low employee motivation, or fashioning a new and more attractive incentive programme, would find the latter more expedient. 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, according to Kohn, makes problems and ignores reasons. The underlying problems however continue to fester.

4) **Rewards Discourage Risk-taking** – Work, at its best, should be an open-ended encounter with ideas, the dangling of rewards however changes employee focus to achieving the prize as quickly as possible, with risk-taking as 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". Devoting time and energy to quality work will just slow him down –or so says author.

5) **Rewards Affect Intrinsic Motivation** – Intrinsic motivation, according to the author, is the self-motivation to do a task simply for the challenge involved. In other words if we find our jobs interesting, challenging, and meaningful, regardless of the payment involved, its intrinsic motivation at work. Kohn believes that internal motivation is far stronger, and more long lasting, than the external variety, which he labels as '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 towards some end... comes to be seen as less desirable."

- b) The Control Factor – Human beings intrinsically 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."

In summary, Kohn's contends, why rewards fail is because, 1) *Rewards punish* 2) *Rewards rupture relationships* 3) *Rewards ignore reason* 4) *Rewards discourage risk taking* 5) *Rewards undermine interests*

What is the alternative?

Having rationalized and proved that we cannot motivate people extrinsically for the reasons listed above, and that intrinsic motivation – being self-generated - cannot be provided for, Kohn suggests that one *can* certainly *create* conditions conducive to intrinsic motivation. Incentives - to start with – need to be abolished. He does not, of course, suggest that wages not be fair and in alignment with the success of the organization. His contention is that once the pay rate has been established, conditions should be created for employees to concentrate on the task at hand. He recommends the following three "C's" for creating motivating conditions:

- 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 more likely to be excited about work." To inspire intrinsic motivation, employees need to be provided with ample opportunities for collaboration and the chance to work in teams. Exchange of ideas, resources and talents must be encouraged and management should ensure that the work groups have their unstinted support.
- 2) **Content:** In a survey of industrial workers from 1946 to 1986 in which people were asked what they look for in a job, "Good wages" ranked fifth out of a possible ten factors. Interestingly, in a more recent survey, "Interesting work" was number one. One of the best ways of providing people with intrinsic motivation is to provide employees with stimulating and meaningful tasks – jobs that are *seen* and *seem* to "make a difference". Employees should be offered tasks with variety, an opportunity to learn new skills and the room to 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 our task" Choice is a critical component of intrinsic motivation. Employees should be given a degree of freedom in their work and allowed to operate with undue interference and control. People should be empowered with real choices and allowed to participate and make substantive decisions regarding the organization.

In a lot of ways, the children at the beginning of the old man story had all the ingredients of intrinsic motivation; a group of friends (*Collaboration*), a fun - if negative activity (*Content*), and lots of ways they could do it (*Choices*). The clever old man interrupted all that with the introduction of rewards, de-motivating the kids (to his benefit).

In concluding his review of Kohn's book, Blum observes that motivating by rewards is easy, it is a lot more difficult to restructure the workplaces to inspire intrinsic motivation. Moving away from the reward giving habit, at home and at work, will take some thought and effort, but as Kohn skilfully demonstrates in his book, it's certainly worth considering.

Relevance for Pharma managers

In today's competitive scenario- such as that of the Pharma market, managers resort to more and more lucrative incentive schemes to motivate their sales force

to deliver ultra-stretch numbers. In several Pharma companies, the ratio between fixed wages and incentives is approximately 60:40, the logic being that with such a large component of the compensation coming from incentives, the sales force would work their shoes off to achieve their targets. This has been the conventional thinking and practice. Kohn's argument goes totally contrary to this belief. It also brings into focus motivational theories Herzberg's motivation-hygiene theory. According to Herzberg, motivators such as achievement, recognition for accomplishment, challenging work etc., lie in the job itself. Hygiene factors comprise environmental factors such as working conditions, money, status, security etc. Hygiene factors when satisfied, as Hersey and Blanchard observe, in their book *Management of Organizational Behavior*, tend to *eliminate dissatisfaction and work restriction*, but they do little to motivate an individual to *superior performance or increased capacity*. Satisfaction of the motivators, however, will permit an individual to grow and develop in a mature way, often implementing an increase in ability. Hygiene factors, conclude Hersey and Blanchard, affect an individual's willingness or motivation and motivators impact an individual's ability. Some food for thought for business managers when the time for next year's budgets trundles around!