

# ■ Motivation: An Inside-Out Proposition

by Tom Terez

**Q. The company where I work is big into incentives and rewards like dinners, mugs, and plaques. My cubicle is filled with stuff, and while I appreciate the thought, my feelings are mixed. What's your take on this?**

**A.** I don't know who started this notion of trying to influence human behavior with an assortment of "goodies." It probably started back in cave-dwelling times: "Free club to whoever brings back the most dead animals!" Or maybe Atilla the Hun held recognition dinners for his top warriors in which he presented them with mugs bearing phrases like "The Best of the Worst."

Even though we're out of caves and no longer fighting on the Asian steppe, we still cling to this system of carrots. A recent study showed that fully 12 million people in 1997 received a mug imprinted with the words "There's no 'I' in team." A follow-up study found that 8 million of these recipients wanted to say: "No, but there's a 'ME.'" Among this group, 3 million actually *did* say it, and a quarter of these people went on to use their mugs to catch run-off grease from their gas grills. So the impact is not always what management intends.

In some cases, rewards and incentives (extrinsic) trivialize people's commitment (intrinsic) to their work, as this real example illustrates:

Janice (presenting at a special awards banquet): Chris, I know I've ignored your ideas for the past 20 years, and I fully intended to keep doing so during the next 20, but I'd like you to accept this mug as

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a small token of my hope that you won't show up for work some day wielding a baseball bat.

Chris: (chuckling good-naturedly)

Janice (holding up the mug so all the highly envious co-workers can see): It says, "There's no 'I' in team." Chris, you truly have the team spirit.

Chris: Thanks, Janice, this mug will sure come in handy. How did you know I have a gas grill?

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## ■ Motivation: An Inside-Out Proposition *continued*

Our cultural obsession with rewards and incentives runs so deep in part because people get exposed to it so early in life. I myself—an arch enemy of extrinsic motivators—have fallen into the trap. It happened at 4:10 a.m. several years ago, during a trying two hours in which my daughter was crying at a decibel level slightly exceeding that of a Led Zeppelin concert. Desperate to restore my ear drums (and her vocal cords) to a state of normalcy, I tried to “incent” her to stop by giving her a “team spirit” mug—but she only cried harder. I then resorted to Skinnerian tactics. That’s right, I started offering bribes—uh, I mean, incentives. The result? She eventually stopped crying...and I now owe her a brand new car when she turns 16. Prediction: This car deal will be her very first memory as a child.

Some friends of ours tried incentives as part of the potty-training process. Their “clever” idea:

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### **If we just said no to organizational carrots, the entire economy of the Western world would collapse.**

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to give their daughter a Tootsie Roll each time she successfully executed a No. 2 in the potty chair. It worked for a day or two, but the girl then developed an apparent case of “potty attachment.” She had to go at least once every 30 minutes, which caused the parents great concern, mainly because they were dipping into their vacation fund to buy cases of Tootsie Rolls. They also encountered an all-new challenge: what to

reward their daughter for brushing her teeth every 15 minutes.

Unfortunately, if we just said no to organizational carrots, the entire economy of the Western world would collapse. Producers of mugs, plaques, pins, trophies, baseball bats, and Tootsie Rolls would be begging us: “Please, we’ll give a free weekend hotel stay for two to the first person who comes to their senses and goes back to extrinsic motivators!”

The corporate lapel-pin industry *alone* does \$8 trillion of business each year, in part because 7% of the population carries the “pin gene,” which compels a person to bedeck his or her clothing with as many pins as possible. You may know some of these people, or you may have seen them at conferences struggling to maneuver under all that extra weight, or maybe you have been stuck behind one of them at an airport metal detector. If your boss carries the pin gene, it is a virtual certainty that you have received pins for “a job well done.”

Now that I’ve guaranteed that I will never, ever receive another mug or lapel pin, let me share some serious thoughts on how people

can address this issue:

- Read *Punished by Rewards* by Alfie Kohn. In it, he pulls together study after study showing that extrinsic motivators do just the opposite of what people expect and intend. (Another great Kohn book is *No Contest*, in which he takes a no-holds-barred stand against another cultural obsession: competition.)

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● Take stock of the extrinsic motivators currently being dangled in front of employees in your workplace. What is being achieved with these rewards and incentives? Are they producing any unintended consequences? What can be done to make the most of people's intrinsic motivation?

● If and when you feel an urge to dole out extrinsic rewards, have a conversation with the would-be recipient. Ask them how *they* would like to be acknowledged for their great work. Prediction: mugs and plaques won't come up. What will: requests for more challenging assign-

ments, conversations about innovative ideas, and a genuine appreciation for asking.

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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