

Behavior Modification

By T. Scott Gross

Spiffs, rewards, bonuses, it doesn't matter what you call them. They are nothing more than attempts to shape employee behavior, and most are wrapped around a contest. You could even say that contests are nothing more than corporate attempts at behavior modification. But if you understand how contests and games work, you have a clear picture of the larger issues of running a work team. Behavior modification is, by the way, perfectly ethical, moral, and legal when you do it right. One word that substitutes nicely for behavior modification is... *management!*

But back to the idea of contests. Contests that work are usually constructed to modify short-term behavior, whereas pay plans (another form of contest) and policies are focused on long-term behavior or performance. With either you must be concerned over possible unintended consequence.

One fast food restaurant operator watched sales per transaction drop after a timer was installed to measure speed of service. Faced with an ever-ticking clock, employees abandoned attempts to sell side items and drinks in an effort to satisfy service time standards.

Another instance shows that an auto accessories shop rewarded the sales staff for gross sales and sweetened the pot with frequent spiffs paid for units sold. The sales crew had some latitude when pricing a deal. They also had those spiffs hanging temptingly close. Should anyone be surprised that the result was unnecessary discounting?

One danger of performance shaping policies and systems is that inevitably when you focus on one

area of performance, something else is going to suffer.

Tipped employees don't want to leave the sales floor to do side work; sales persons don't want to do administrative work or customer service follow up.

Thinking Point

The physics of contests are simple: For every motivation there is an equal and opposite motivation.

Here's what you have to know for a contest to work: The contest term must be appropriate for the maturity of those involved; the reward must be perceived as such; the score must always be visible (and the players should keep their own score); the desired behavior must be precisely targeted; the results must be achievable; you should reward the team rather than the individual; and the contest must be emotionally engaging.

Maturity. If there is a single biggest flaw with performance-shaping programs, it is that too many don't take into account the emotional maturity of the players. Some folks have trouble thinking beyond Friday. A contest involving these folks rewarding performance measured over the next year is totally useless. It's better to adjust the rewards and the term.

Reward. Win the contest and you get to go to dinner with the boss. Is that a reward or the booby prize? Well, it depends. For some folks dinner with the boss could be a huge motivator; for others it might be a source of embarrassment or discomfort.

The best contests allow the winner to choose the reward.

Visible Score. Keeping score can be motivating. In games and

other forms of contests always knowing the score is a motivator. And it's much better to let the players keep track of their own score.

When we ran our small restaurant we would occasionally place a tube of large drink cups in front of each register and clip a five dollar bill to the order board. "Whoever sells their tube of large cups first can take the five bucks." Short term, everybody can relate to a five dollar bill, and there was constant feedback in the form of two rapidly diminishing tubes of cups.

Targeted Behavior. Because of the law of motivation, which is "for every motivator there is an equal and opposite motivator," you must be careful to target the desired behavior. For employees to sell a large drink in the case mentioned above, a customer's motivation might have been to purchase a medium drink or no drink at all. However, had we clipped a hundred-dollar bill to the order board, we bet the motivation to pick up the prize might have transcended the need to be courteous.

Achievable. Motivate an employee against an obstacle that is insurmountable and you don't get performance; you get frustration. Ask an employee to perform a complicated task without proper tools or adequate training, and all you'll get is stress with no results. Offer a reward for performance that is unachievable, and instead of performance you'll get anger and resentment.

Too many managers make good on only a portion of the manager's credo:

Assemble the team

Sell the dream

Remove obstacles

Say thank-you

Motivating a team to tackle insurmountable obstacles is worse than counterproductive; it's cruel.

Reward the Team. It is usually a mistake to create a contest (performance management system) that rewards a single winner. When players enter a contest on unequal footing that relies on individual talent and experience, the other players may simply give up if early in the game a single player takes a huge lead. They may even act to sabotage the leader.

One rarely considered negative of rewarding a single player is that the leaders will be motivated to not share their expertise with other team players, who might knock them from the lead.

Emotional engagement. Effective performance management systems play off what motivates the employee, not what motivates the boss. But the employees aren't motivated! Yes, they are! They just aren't motivated to do what you, the boss, want them to do.

Thank God for Denny's! Without Denny's and a sure hand on an egg pan, I would have never paid my way through college. And I wouldn't understand how conflicting motivators can influence performance.

In the summer I usually worked the breakfast shift. I loved it and always thought I was pretty good at it. But when classes resumed for the fall, I switched to swing shift, working from three in the afternoon until eleven at night. I liked that too but was a bit miffed one season when the boss scheduled me to work solo every Monday, Tuesday, and Wednesday.

"Boss, how come you have me working alone all the time? Couldn't I at least get the occasional weekend breakfast shift?"

"Sorry, I need you those shifts. You're the only cook I have who can work those shifts by himself. If I schedule someone else I'll have to add a second body to handle the rush. You're the fast one."

"We can fix that!" It was a threat that earned me a favored Saturday breakfast run.

Years later I had a great kid working for me when I ran a fast-food restaurant. He was fast, clean, and personable-everything you could ask for in an employee of any age. At least until he met Krista. All of a sudden the kid who was always early to report could barely make it to work on time. Most bosses would say that he had lost his motivation, but that would be totally wrong. This kid was, and continued to be, highly motivated. The problem was that the motivator had changed. Suddenly, instead of being turned on by the kudos earned for good performance at work, he was turned on by a sweet young thing named Krista.

Thinking Point

The boss has to find out exactly what it is that motivates each individual employee and figure how to turn that to an advantage.

"So what" is exactly what many employees say when they hear about the latest contest or pay plan. Just as customers define what great service is, employees define what is good for them; and you aren't going to know how to motivate your crew unless you ask.

Thinking Point

How could you discover what "turns on" each of your employees, and could you devise a reward system that caters to each individual personality?