

# Rewards aren't academic

I have often noticed the destructive effects of the academic promotion system. Many of those who see their colleagues promoted above them feel resentful. Many of those who apply unsuccessfully become bitter. And many of those who are promoted suffer a precipitous decline in productivity in the aftermath.

The usual response to such problems is to develop a fairer, more efficient promotion system, or just to blame the individuals for their bad attitude. But there is another, perhaps surprising explanation. It is that incentives for academics to do better work are actually counterproductive.

Alfie Kohn in his new book *Punished by Rewards: The Trouble with Gold Stars, Incentive Plans, As, Praise, and other Bribes* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1993) gives the evidence for this point of view. There certainly is plenty of evidence.

For example, preschool children who expected awards for drawing with felt-tip pens produced drawings that were judged lower in quality than when they expected no awards. When rewards were given to university students, they took longer to solve a problem requiring creativity. Creative artists have been found to do "less creative" work when they have commissions. People who were given rewards to quit smoking or use seat belts were less likely to change than those who were given no rewards.

These findings are quite a challenge. After all, rewards are widely used and are simply assumed to be effective. Children are promised presents for good behaviour; students are given the incentive of grades; workers are offered bonuses. Kohn agrees that behaviourist techniques are used widely. He also argues that they are not effective.

Kohn gives several reasons why rewards produce poorer rather than better performance. First, the withdrawal of a reward operates like a punishment, and punishment is a very bad way to improve behaviour. Second, rewards cause disruptions in relationships, especially when competition is involved. The rivalry for academic promotions is a case in point.



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Third, giving rewards avoided finding out the reasons for behaviour. Promising high marks for good work is diversionary if a student is having problems at home. Fourth, people seeking rewards avoid risks, because they do just what is required for the reward. Students who are worried about their marks are likely to be conformist, as are academics who are worried about their jobs. The fifth and most important problem with rewards is that they reduce a person's intrinsic interest in doing something.

I've mentioned these findings to several people. There are two common questions. First, "what about praise?" Kohn has a chapter on this. Praise can be counterproductive too. For example, he cites a study showing that children who are often praised for their generous acts actually show somewhat less generosity than those who aren't praised. Not all words of support are counterproductive, but certainly those intended to manipulate behaviour are.

The other common question is "what's the alternative to rewards?" This is more difficult, because there is no single, simple answer. Rewards are a quick fix. Promoting appropriate behaviours relies on a range of techniques, depending on what is to be achieved.

Three key considerations are hav-

ing something worthwhile to do, working collaboratively rather than competitively and having a say in how things are done. Kohn shows how this approach applies to three significant areas: the workplace, school and rearing children.

Applying the insights from *Punished by Rewards* to higher education would entail dramatic changes. For example, most of the federal government's intervention in higher education since 1987 has been based on a punish-and-reward strategy. The recent quality exercise combines the worst combination of techniques: financial rewards and a competition in which only a few can be winners. Rather than improving quality in higher education, it is only likely to improve quality submissions. A much better approach would be to provide quality money to all institutions on an equal per-student basis, to eliminate rankings and to provide feedback confidentially to each institution.

The harmful effect of rewards can be seen in many other aspects of university life, including incentive pay, competitive research grants, teaching awards, honorary societies and Nobel prizes. This is not to mention the harmful effect of punishments. The vice-chancellors' proposals to make it easier to dismiss academics would have a devastating impact on the quality of scholarly work.

However, the most destructive use of rewards occurs through the use of grades and degrees for students. Admittedly, most university students were long ago thoroughly conditioned to do work only if some assessment is attached to it. Given the nature of course structures, innovation in order to promote students' intrinsic motivation to learn is not easy.

*Punished by Rewards* is well argued, well referenced and straightforward to read. It is also one of those rare books which has a useful and practical message. No prizes for being first in your department to read it.

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