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Rewards and Punishment: A Fine Distinction: A Behavior Analyst's Reply to Alfie Kohn's (1993) *Punished by Rewards*

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When I began, I did not know where to start. After I had started, I did not know where to stop. I had hoped to respond to each and every one of Mr. Kohn's main points as presented by Clay. I discovered, however, that I had too much to say (which, of course, is the disease of academics). I therefore had to be content to pick and choose. I hope I have done so wisely.

But before I start, let me first divorce the field of behavior analysis from Mr. Kohn's presentation of it. Mr. Kohn would have us believe that the world is full of "Skinnerians": business executives, teachers, parents. Would that it were true. . . Unfortunately, I believe that we have a long way to go before that occurs.

I must admit that I do not recognize the "behaviorism" I have been trained in most of my adult life and have been teaching to my students for the past ten years in Mr. Kohn's characterizations, "pop" or not. I do not recognize the type of reward systems that I and other behavior analysts recommend in Mr. Kohn's critiques of wayward reward systems. Aubrey Daniels, in his book, *Bringing Out the Best in People*, makes the same point in a much more entertaining way. "Toward the end of the second day of one of my seminars, a man raised his hand and asked, "Are we doing anything right?" I replied that I had not said he was doing anything wrong. He responded, "Yes, but so far everything you have said to do, we're doing the opposite" (1994, p. xiii). So, sadly, I contend that the world is not full of behavior analysts.

Now let me begin.....

Is it Right To Reward?

Mr. Kohn objects to the use of rewards, including praise, on moral grounds because they are used to control others. I must admit, once again, that I do not recognize myself, my behavioral colleagues, nor those I have worked with in business as people who use rewards to *control others* (p. 26); to get them to do what *they* want them to do (p. xii); to obtain *compliance* (p. 4); to *induce or pressure people* to do things *they would not freely do* (p. 26); or *"invariably"* use rewards to promote *order and obedience* (p. 30) (my emphases). According to Mr. Kohn, there is simply no such thing as a good reward.

Certainly, rewards can be used to control people, to get them to do what they would not otherwise do, and even to engage in behaviors that are not in their own best interests. But there is another side of rewards. Most people I know use rewards to recognize good work and a job well done. Paul Chance recently responded to Mr. Kohn's moral objections, and while he placed his comments in the context of the educational setting, his point is relevant to other settings as well. "Mr. Kohn states that moral issues are involved. The implication is that I and other teachers who use rewards are immoral. If it is immoral to let students know they have answered questions correctly, to pat a student on the back for a good effort, to show joy at a student's understanding of a concept, or to recognize the achievement of a goal by providing a gold star or certificate—if this is immoral, then count me a sinner" (1993, p. 788). Count me one as well. I also want to let my students know when they have done a good job and, quite frankly, would like others to let me know when I have done a good job. We sometimes forget that one way we know we have done a good job is that people tell us so. And one way they can tell us so is by giving us rewards and recognition. But, that said, we do need to pay careful attention to the way we design reward systems so that they will convey what we want them to and will not be experienced as controlling and manipulative. Toward that end, I suggest the following:

1) Target behaviors and results that are in the best interests of the individual. That is, select for reward those behaviors and results that are part of the individual's job responsibilities and/or will lead to advancement, and do so in a collaborative manner.

2) Accentuate the positive and eliminate the negative (punishment). A reward system that includes big sticks will tend to be perceived as controlling and aversive.

3) Use positive, not negative reinforcement. Positive reinforcement consists of providing a reward immediately after a behavior; negative reinforcement consists of terminating an aversive event, such as criticism, immediately after a behavior occurs. While both positive and negative reinforcement are desirable from the individual's perspective, negative reinforcement carries with it natural aversiveness, for in order for an aversive event to be terminated, it must be present in the first place.

4) Make it fun! Aubrey Daniels does this better than anyone I know. I will tantalize you a bit by suggesting that you read Gail Snyder's "Fun, a new theme in productivity" in the 1994 Winter issue of *Performance Management Magazine*, published by Aubrey Daniels & Associates. You can read about The Space Mountain Quest and the Great Energy Roundup in Honeywell's space systems division; the SAARU Express in Honeywell's software engineering department; and the Wile E. Coyote and Roadrunner Race-Across-the-Desert in Honeywell's project development and control department. And it is OK to chuckle when you read about them. I did.

The Trouble with Carrots: Four Reasons Rewards Fail

I would like to address three of Kohn's reasons: 1) rewards punish, 2) rewards ignore reasons, and 3) rewards discourage risk-taking.

Rewards punish. If, under performance management reward systems, "people do not get the rewards they were hoping to get" (Kohn, 1993, p. 52) of course their efforts will be discouraged. The reward system *will indeed* become a punishment system. I can think of four common reasons why employees do not get the rewards they hope for and expect. First, they are not aware of the behaviors and results that lead to reward. Second, they and their supervisor disagree about how well they performed. Third, employees may not meet performance goals and criteria upon which rewards are based. Fourth, rewards may be competitive, dividing employees into winners and losers. I recommend the following:

1) Develop specific, objective, and reliable measures of behaviors and results, and use these to monitor the progress of employees on an on-going basis (daily, weekly). Do *not* rely on semi-annual or annual subjective performance appraisals (in fact, get rid of these if at all possible). Reward improvements and good performance richly, with both social and tangible rewards. Such a system will take care of the first two concerns.

2) Ensure that the goals and criteria upon which rewards are based are realistic: that employees *can* and *do* meet them. Goals should be based on the historical performance of employees, measured over a long period of time, rather than "engineered." I have found that individuals rarely resist and, in fact, readily support such goals. If necessary, develop individualized goals and shape/train desired performance, rewarding every step of the way.

3) Make the opportunity for reward available to everyone. In other words, avoid competitive reward systems in which one person's reward decreases another's opportunity for reward. Common examples of troublesome competitive systems include Employee of the Month programs, sales contests, and suggestion systems (Daniels, 1994). Although one person wins, many lose.

I do not recognize the "behaviorism" I have been trained in most of my adult life and have been teaching to my students for the past ten years in Mr. Kohn's characterizations, "pop" or not.

Rewards Ignore Reasons. "...So, the first step when attempting to change the way people perform is to *understand why they are currently behaving the way they are*" (Daniels, 1994, p. 35, his emphasis).

Rewards may ignore reasons, but behavior analysts do not. We call our field behavior *analysis* to emphasize that very fact. Mr. Kohn will not agree with the "reasons" that we identify for behavior, but he cannot, in fairness, argue that we ignore them. Browse through the bookshelves of those of us who specialize in performance management, and I dare say that you will see the following titles: *Analyzing Performance Problems* (Mager & Pipe, 1970) (I still have the well-worn version that I purchased in 1973 for $2.75); *Behavioral Analysis* *in Business and Industry; A Total Performance System* (Brethower, 1972); *Human Competence: Engineering Worthy Performance* (Gilbert, 1978); *Improving Performance: How to Manage the White Space on the Organization Chart* (Rummler & Brache, 1990). (These books are probably familiar to you as well since they are all written by NSPI VIPs). Just as Joe Harless (1975) stressed the importance of conducting front-end analyses in his book *An Ounce of Analysis is Worth a Pound of Objectives,* so, too, do these. We recognize that organization- and process-level systems may impede performance. We recognize that jobs may need to be restructured. We recognize that workers may not have the information and instrumentation they need to perform well. We recognize that workers may not have the skills they need to perform well. And yes, we even recognize that personal problems may interfere with performance. We recommend that these factors be identified and solved, when necessary, prior to instituting a reward system for individuals.

Rewards Discourage Risk-taking. Many years ago, Kerr (1975) wrote an article entitled "On the folly of rewarding A, while hoping for B." Rewards are powerful. You *will* get what you reward. The solution is in the analysis: If risk-taking is to be encouraged, if quality is desired, if innovation and creativity are essential, specify the particular behaviors and results that comprise them, and then reward them richly. Needless to say, such analyses will not be easy. An example of how to analyze and reward innovation, in this case the innovation of business consultants, can be found in Gail Snyder's article (1989b) "The Wild Beyonder" in the Summer-Fall issue of *Performance Management Magazine*. It is good. [While you are looking through that issue, you might also want to read "How Do You Reinforce a Neurosurgeon?" I recommend it as well. It may help offset Mr. Kohn's notion that "Rewards usually improve performance only at extremely simple—indeed, mindless—tasks" (p. 46).]

Cutting the Interest Rate - The Fifth Reason Rewards Fail.

I fear that Mr. Kohn has not told us the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth. He argues that all rewards, including praise, undermine interest. When rewards are provided for successful performance, they *enhance* interest, of that there is no doubt. The research results are consistent and robust (Dickinson, 1989). If you follow the guidelines I have provided earlier, people *will* be successful, and your reward system *will* lead to increased interest.

As it turns out, Mr. Kohn's extremist position is not even supported by those whose research he cites most often. David Greene and Mark Lepper state, "If rewards provide an individual with new information about his ability at a particular task, this may bolster his feelings of competence and his desire to engage in that task for its own sake" (1974, p. 54). Dr. Lepper further contends that "Certainly, there is nothing in the present line of reasoning or the present data to suggest that contracting to engage in an extrinsic reward will always, or even usually, result in a decrement in intrinsic interest. . ." (1981, p. 170). Although Edward Deci and Richard Ryan maintain that rewards are typically perceived as controlling and thus usually do decrease intrinsic motivation, they also state, "When used to convey to people a sense of appreciation for work well done, [rewards, like feedback] will tend to be experienced informationally and will maintain or enhance intrinsic motivation..." (1985, p. 300).

Speaking of creativity, Theresa Amabile, in response to an article written by Mr. Kohn, replied, "Kohn is absolutely right when he tells us that rewards can work against real commitment and creativity. But he doesn't tell the whole story. There are important differences between bribes and equitable compensation, and there are conditions under which rewards can **increase** involvement and creativity" (1993, p. 42, her emphasis).

One might conclude that Mr. Kohn may be a lonely voice in the wilderness. Or perhaps another way of stating it may be that "fools rush in where angels fear to tread."

In closing. . .

We behavior analysts may well have to take part of the blame for the very real fact that some reward programs end up being punishment systems. In our enthusiasm for spreading the word, we have, at times, dispensed technology without teaching the underlying *science of behavior*. I have, in this article, suggested some guidelines that will help ensure that reward systems are truly rewarding. Let me hasten to add, however, that while these conditions are necessary, they are *not* sufficient. Having said that, I would like to summarize them for you.

1) Analyze first. Discover the reasons why people are performing the way they are, and remove any impediments prior to designing and implementing a reward system.

2) Target behaviors and results that are in the best interests of the individual. Select, for reward, behaviors and results that are part of the individual's job responsibilities and/ or will lead to advancement, and do so in a collaborative manner.

3) Identify all critical dimensions of desired behaviors and results (quantity, quality, timeliness, creativity, risk-taking, etc.).

4) Develop specific, objective, and reliable measures of behaviors and results.

5) Monitor progress frequently (daily, weekly).

6) Ensure that the goals and criteria upon which rewards are based are realistic: That people can and do meet them. Base goals and criteria on historical performance. If necessary, develop individualized goals and shape/train desired performance, rewarding every step of the way.

7) Make the opportunity for reward available to everyone. Avoid competitive reward systems.

8) Accentuate the positive and eliminate the negative (punishment). Punish only—*only*—when absolutely necessary.

9) Use positive, not negative reinforcement.

10) Reward richly, but contingently.

11) Make it fun!

Mr. Kohn states that rewards "offer a temptingly simple way to get people to do what we want." I prefer Aubrey Daniels' sage advice, "If you think this is easy, you are doing it wrong" (1994, p. 171).

I hope you will seek out the science of behavior to help you.

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Rewarded by Punishment

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I found Alfie Kohn's *Punished by Rewards* (1993) punishing because it ignored much of what we know about rewards and focused only on their frequent improper use in organizations. By analogy, maybe we should prohibit the practice of modern medicine because many doctors do so badly, losing patients along the way. But I was rewarded by the punishment of Kohn's book, or at least by Clay Carr's summary of it (this issue), since it got me thinking about the power of rewards and my "upbringing" in behavioral psychology. I was also rewarded by the articles of Alyce Dickinson and Tom Mawhinney, and especially by the latter's summary of the meta-analysis by Cameron, Pierce, and Epling (1994). Their findings accord with my experience in the workplace. And, it is from this experience that I would like to mount my soapbox and launch into a diatribe on *Punished by Rewards*.