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Punishment by Reality

by Ken Embley, CPPA

My colleague, Janice Houston, points out that a number of well-intended people made great efforts to realize the promise of sales tax ideals. What is the reward for their valiant efforts—punishment by reality.

The topic of this article is—**public sector incentive programs**. How many times have we experienced well-intended and valiant efforts to devise an incentive program for public employees where the reward for doing so is—punishment by reality? Do recent changes in the State of Utah sick leave policy or proposed changes to the Jordan School District retirement policy come to mind? Well, if the topic of public sector incentives is of interest to you, you may be interested in what the grandpas of the world have to say about incentives.

When I am out visiting public agencies, I hear employees complain about the lack of incentives and I hear well-intended managers discuss valiant efforts to provide incentives. On one occasion, a particular manager boasted of the monies set aside for incentives and in the same breath, complained about ungrateful employees—ah, the valiant effort of a well-intended person whose reward is—punishment by reality.

Can you provide your public employees with incentives—with expectations of reward that induces action or motivates effort (Dictionary.com/incentives)? The simple answer is yes! The realistic answer is maybe!

A fundamental problem with incentives is that, by definition, an incentive is an act of manipulation (expectations of reward that induces action or motivates effort). Alfie Kohn is the author of *Punished by Rewards / the Trouble with Gold Stars, A's, Praise, and other Bribes*. In his book, Mr. Kohn makes the point that any person who manipulates another will eventually pay a heavy price for that manipulation.

Therefore, if you want incentives, the first thing you must do is ensure that a common understanding of the means and methods of manipulation is in place and that all involved respect and value the process. Here is where the grandpas of the world come into play. A long time ago the grandpas of the world learned to say, "I have some candy for the little ones who can give me the biggest and best hugs and kisses." In this case, the grandpas and grandkids both have a common understanding of the hugs and kiss game and both like the game. Collectively, they are manipulating the heck out of each other but both love it. The lesson, be like the grandpas of the world—**where everyone understands, and all involved respect and value the incentive process**.

Now, if you want incentives, the second thing you must do is ensure that you have a reliable means to deliver the desired reward. There are actually two things that you must do. When I say, "a reliable means to deliver," it means having on-going resources to ensure delivery (usually a budget) and when I say "a desired reward," it means the recipient needs to value the reward. Always remember, management can offer new and exciting rewards, but management cannot take those same rewards away from recipients, Mr. Kohn predicts, without paying a heavy price for the manipulation. You see, grandpas have it easy. Grandpas have what seems to be a reliable source of candy that grandkids love. The lesson, be like the grandpas of the world—**have a reliable means to deliver a desired reward**.



Finally, if you want incentives, recipients must see the measures of successful achievement as being fair and equitable. The question is—how will you determine who gets the reward and will those involved see your method of determination as being fair and equitable? Again, grandpas have this down pat. Grandpas know the difference between a good hug and a bad hug and they know what good kisses are, and they have lots of fun, and so do the kids, working together to achieve the measures of success. If you want incentives, you need to be like the grandpas in the world where everyone involved can recognize measures of success and everyone involved knows they can achieve the measures of success and together, all involved relish in the success of every member. The lesson, be like the grandpas of the world—***be sure the measures of successful achievement are fair and equitable.***

Can your organization benefit by creating a public employees incentive program? The answer is yes—as long as you can be like the grandpas in this world.

However, incentive programs require that you address and solve each of the three issues. If you cannot do that, your well-intended and valiant efforts will likely be in vain. Even the grandpas of the world, who are well intended and make valiant efforts, have trouble over time. All it takes is for the grandkids to get a little older. When this happens, the ability to comply with the three issues becomes more and more difficult and even we grandpas begin to experience—punishment by reality.

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