

Rewarding Participants To Encourage Learning

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The key to the effective use of rewards is to do so in a manner that promotes a bit of diversion and not have rewards become a goal of the program. Some trainers use so many games, gimmicks and rewards that learners lose focus of why they are there – for learning. Instead, they get caught up in the competitions and the rewards that result. While use of rewards can be helpful in encouraging participation and desired behavior to some extent, they should be used for fun and not as a primary learning vehicle in your programs.

Rewards come in many tangible forms. Anything that you use to inspire, encourage motivation, or compensate a learner can be a reward or incentive. For something to be categorized as a reward, it should generally meet the following three criteria:

Valuable

Learners need to recognize the item you are giving as a reward as having positive value. Examples of such rewards include, candy, stickers, toys, food, prizes, or gifts. The dollar value is irrelevant since each learner places importance and desirability on his or her own experience and need.

Predictable

A second criterion for determining if something is a reward is its predictability. For example, you use small prizes, such as candy, cookies, or other incentives as a reward for group accomplishment following an activity. Behavioral researchers have developed the following schedules for reinforcing behavior.

- **Continuous reinforcement.** Giving rewards provides a learner an incentive or prize each time an action is taken, behavior improves, or the person meets established criteria (e.g. following each correct response volunteered).
- **Intermittent reinforcement.** When a predetermined ratio or time schedule is met and a reward is provided, learners are being intermittently compensated (e.g. at the end of each activity or on the hour).
- **Fixed-ratio reinforcement.** In some situations you might provide a reward at specified intervals or at a fixed time (e.g. after someone answers five questions correctly, they receive a reward).
- **Variable-ratio reinforcement.** When learners are rewarded based on group average, or an average number of responses, they are receiving variable

reinforcement (e.g. if the average test score is 80, then everyone scoring 80 or higher on a test would be rewarded).

- **Fixed-interval reinforcement.** When you spread rewards out over a uniform time periods, you are using a fixed pattern of reinforcement (e.g. rewards are given at the beginning of each break and lunch period).
- **Variable-interval reinforcement.** There may be times when you want to give rewards at unannounced or unpredictable times (e.g. you arbitrarily decide to give everyone on a learner's team a reward because each group member offered ideas during a discussion or returned from break on time).

Purposeful

The third criteria used to determine if something you give is a reward is its purpose. If your goal in giving or withdrawing something is to change participant behavior or to influence them to be more motivated, then it is a reward.

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