Rewards Make Training More Fulfilling
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The Purpose of Rewards

To add a bit of festivity and fun while reinforcing learning that occurs during your training sessions, try using rewards, recognition and celebrations. Many adult learners enjoy having an opportunity to have their knowledge and efforts recognized or to culminate an activity with some form of celebration or ritual. Such acknowledgement and reward can be something as simple as a verbal compliment or feedback on performance. It can also be a more tangible form, such as a small prize or group celebration with gifts. In effect, when recognition occurs in a safe environment where threats and negative stress are minimal or eliminated, creativity, problem-solving, interaction and transfer of knowledge often result.

According to some researchers and educators rewards, also referred to as bribes, do not work well in reinforcing learning for younger people. Their position is that rewards merely reinforce rote behavior or mindless compliance to the teacher or instructor and may actually inhibit learning. While small or short-term rewards can encourage and stimulate action, longer term behavior (e.g. learning and memory) can actually be impeded.

However, adults have already formed basic behavior and values. As a result, rewards and incentives can be used to encourage in a light-hearted manner, reminiscent of younger days. Still, usage of rewards should be well-planned and should never distract from learning activities. Like training aids, they should reinforce learning and tie into session theme rather than appearing arbitrary. Further, Howard Pierce (*The Owner's Manual for the Brain*) indicates that research reports, "…rewards for effort are more encouraging in the long run than rewards for success. Research suggests that no one general rule defines the best way to encourage creative excellence. People are different. Do what works. To encourage creativity in a person, match his or her personality and its attendant values. Reward extroverts with a part, introverts with a good book!" Pierce goes on to say you should emphasize verbal encouragement and time your encouragement for occasions of special effort and achievement from learners.

Criteria for Rewards

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 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 whether 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.** This schedule for 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 hiring 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 final criteria used to determine whether 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.

Like any other aspect of effective training, rewards must be well thought out, relevant to the session, used purposely to enhance rather than detract, and add value to the event. They should also be built into your lesson plans so that they connect at the appropriate times.

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