

Using Rewards Effectively

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To add a bit of festivity and fun while reinforcing learning that occurred 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 known 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 trainer and may actually inhibit learning. While small or short-term rewards can encourage and stimulate action, long-term behavior (e.g. learning and memory) can actually be impeded. Even so, adults have already formed basic behavior and values. As a result, you can use rewards and incentives to encourage learners in a light-hearted manner, reminiscent of younger days.

You should use rewards in a well planned manner and they should never distract from learning activities. Like training aids, they should reinforce learning and tie into session theme rather than appearing arbitrary. According to Pierce Howard in his book, *The Owner's Manual for the Brain*, research indicates, "...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.

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

Give rewards in a predictable fashion. For example, you use small prizes, such as candy, cookies, or other incentives as a reward for group accomplishment following an activity.

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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