

Student's Name

Professor's Name

Course Name

Date

Employee Motivation: Incentives or Punishment

Jeremy Bentham, 18th century polymath, noted that “pain and pleasure govern us in all we do, in all we say, in all we think” (Sharot 1). This statement describes the impact that incentives and punishments have on employees in the workplace. To make employee act or improve their performance in the workplace, employers have been found to try to elicit the anticipation of pleasure using incentives such as a bonus, positive feedback, a promotion and recognition or warn employees of the pain of punishment (negative feedback or demotion) (Sharot 2).

While incentives or punishment motivate action from employees in one way or another, it has been shown that the choice of the time to use either is important in eliciting the needed action from an employee (Sharot 2). When unexpected, an incentive or punishment yields the greatest motivation (Blanding 1). Blanding also observed that how much these systems spur action from employees depends on how fair employee perceive them to be.

Additionally, while some authors have argued that incentive or punishment elicit almost similar action from employees, it should not be confused that they can be interchanged.

Incentives have been shown to work better than punishments. In a study conducted by a hospital

in NY to increase the frequency of washing hands among staff, it was found that warning signs about the consequences of unsanitized hands (threat of illness to themselves and others) was less effective in motivating employees to wash hands as compared to the electronic positive feedback (Sharot 3). Other authors such as Kohn (1-2) and Korir and Kipkebut (1-2) argued that incentives create temporary compliance and commitment as well as an impression that problems have been solved but in reality they cause harm over the long term.

From these studies, it is evident that both incentives and punishments work to motivate employees in their own way. However, higher motivation is provided by incentives compared to punishments. When applied at the right time and unexpected by employees, incentives can create a sense of commitment and engagement of employees to the organization. Care should be taken to ensure incentives are not given to ensure compliance or temporary commitment. Fairness in providing incentives is also key to ensuring their relevance.

Works Cited

Blanding, Michael. "To Motivate Employees, Give an Unexpected Bonus (or Penalty)." *HBS Working Knowledge*, 26 Mar. 2018,

<http://hbswk.hbs.edu/item/to-motivate-employees-give-an-unexpected-bonus-or-penalty>.

Kohn, Alfie. "Why Incentive Plans Cannot Work." *Harvard Business Review*, no.

September–October 1993, Sept. 1993. *hbr.org*,

<https://hbr.org/1993/09/why-incentive-plans-cannot-work>.

Korir, Isaack, and Dinah Kipkebut. "The Effect of Reward Management on Employees

Commitment in the Universities in Nakuru County-Kenya." *Journal of Human Resource Management*, vol. 4, no. 4, Aug. 2016, p. 37. *article.sciencepublishinggroup.com*,

[doi:10.11648/j.jhrm.20160404.12](https://doi.org/10.11648/j.jhrm.20160404.12).

Sharot, Tali. "What Motivates Employees More: Rewards or Punishments?" *Harvard Business Review*, Sept. 2017. *hbr.org*,

<https://hbr.org/2017/09/what-motivates-employees-more-rewards-or-punishments>.