

## **Does Praise Help or Harm?**

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Most people have, at one time or another, tried to motivate a child, a co-worker, or a client with a little praise, privilege, or even a little pay. Praise has long been considered one of the most effective strategies for helping people learn important skills or undertake challenging tasks. “Catch em being good” has been a rallying cry among educators and other child workers. But it’s not all peaches and cream. In recent years there has been considerable debate about whether praise and other reward and incentive systems do more harm than good. Like everything else these days it seems, praise and rewards have a good side and a bad side. It is important to understand when praise and rewards can have positive effects and when there may be negative effects depending on how praise and rewards are used.

A major concern in psychology and education over the last 30 years is that rewards negatively effect intrinsic motivation. More than 100 research studies have been conducted on this topic, leading some researchers to conclude that giving people prizes, money and even praise for engaging in an activity may actually undermine intrinsic motivation and diminish a their natural interests and creativity. These research studies appear to show that people focused only on the specific behaviors rewarded by the researchers, and kept up those behaviors only so long as the rewards kept coming. When rewards were discontinued, performance dropped off. In addition, the people participating in the research reported that they were less interested in the tasks once the rewards were discontinued. Results like these have lead researchers to believe that using praise and other rewards takes away intrinsic motivation to perform tasks that once were naturally enjoyable. For example, it was feared that rewarding students for reading books would take away the students’ internal interest in reading, and that students then would only read if they were rewarded.

More recent research is suggesting a different and more complex answer. The effectiveness of praise depends on how it is used.

Cameron, Banko, and Pierce (*The Behavior Analyst*, 24, 1-44, 2001) conducted an analysis of over 100 research studies that looked at how praise and rewards affected intrinsic motivation to perform activities. They discovered that, in general, rewards are not harmful to motivation to perform a task. But the effect varies depending on what specifically is rewarded or praised; rewards have different effects when used in different ways. When tasks hold low interest for people (boring or difficult tasks, or tasks that require skills a person has not yet mastered), rewards enhance performance and have no detrimental effects. This finding suggests that rewards can be effectively used to enhance time and performance on low-interest tasks. It takes time and practice to become proficient at many tasks that initially offer little interest or enjoyment, but once proficiency is achieved, enjoyment follows. Learning to read, to play an instrument, to develop athletic prowess at any sport, to develop effective social skills can be facilitated through praise and rewards until sufficient proficiency develops and intrinsic motivation and enjoyment can take over.

On the other hand, when tasks are identified as having high intrinsic motivation, there can be

positive or negative effects on performance, depending on what aspect of performance is rewarded. When tangible rewards (getting stuff) were offered as incentive and loosely tied to level of performance, people would report losing interest in tasks when the rewards stopped coming. However, when rewards were linked to the level of performance – the quality of the work performed – intrinsic motivation did not suffer and in many cases increased.

The bottom line? Praise and/or rewards for improvement results in people completing boring or frustrating tasks and mastering new and/or challenging skills. Rewards for performing easy tasks sometimes results in people losing interest in those tasks when the rewards stop coming. Praise was never found to have a negative effect.

Other studies provide clear examples of how praise and rewards ought to be used.

Mueller and Dweck (*Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 75(1), 33-52, 1998) discovered that praising an attribute or characteristic of a person can be detrimental. Kids who were praised for an attribute like “being smart” would quickly give up on more difficult academic problems once they began encountering failure. The kids tended to blame their failures with the more difficult problems on “not being smart enough” rather than their actual lack of resiliency and persistence in figuring out solutions to problems. Other kids who were praised for working hard to solve problems showed more resiliency and were more persistent when faced with more difficult problems. So when we inadvertently praise people by citing their natural talents, we may be doing more harm than good. We would do better to praise and reward development of effective problem solving skills.

Eisenberger and Cameron (*American Psychologist*, 51(11), 1153-1166, 1996) reviewed a number of research studies and concluded that rewards were detrimental when prizes or praise were awarded for effort without regard to the quality of performance. They suspected that praise needed to focus on the pivotal skills that produced positive outcomes rather than just focus on the outcomes. To prove this point, the researchers studied a large group of elementary students and demonstrated that when kids were rewarded for coming up with *creative* ideas in contrast to coming up with just *any* idea, they were subsequently more creative on future tasks. The study suggests that once the children understood *how to be creative* they were more likely to be creative on other tasks. Praising the essential aspect of creativity – new and novel ideas – worked. Praising effort not necessarily related to creativity, like coming up with just any old idea, did not work. So praising people “for trying” may not be as important as praising people for taking a problem solving approach or a creative approach.

Combining the insight gained from these research studies suggests how to best use praise in our everyday lives and work. Praising people’s *attributes* (inherent fixed characteristics) may actually hinder their future performance. Praising *effort* regardless of the quality of performance also may not help much either. But identifying and praising efforts to master pivotal skills for effective performance clearly does. For example, when a kid scores a goal in soccer, praising the kid for athletic ability (e.g., “you have a natural talent for soccer”) may hinder her efforts when confronted with more difficult soccer matches in the future. Praising the kid’s effort every time she just runs up and down the field may not result in improved performance either. But praising actual improvements in key soccer skills can result in her

mastering more aspects of soccer in the future, leading to better performance and greater self-satisfaction.

The question is not 'to praise or not to praise.' The question is, *what to praise*. And the answer is: behaviors pivotal or principal to achieving effective outcomes. The challenge for us is learning to identify essential features of performance that lead to success. Rewards can be arranged to shape performance progressively (identifying small and successive approximations to the essential skills and praising those successive approximations), to establish interest in activities that lack initial interest, and to maintain or enhance effort and persistence at difficult tasks .

#### References

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