

Successful Supervisor Part 73

Incentives

by Bob Whipple, MBA, CPLP

Is it ever a good practice for supervisor to bribe her employees? I recently asked that question in an online leadership class. We got into a very interesting discussion that highlighted the difference between four words that are sometimes confused by supervisors. Those words are bribe, incentive, reward, and reinforcement. The world will not come to an end if these words are mixed, but since they represent different concepts in motivation theory, it would be wise to use them correctly.

Before or After

All four of these words have the connotation of influencing people to do the things you would like to have them do. The distinction is that two words typically apply before an action is taken while the other two words usually apply after the action.

1. Bribes

The word bribe is a well-known and loaded word. In common usage, it means we are offering people something they want in pre-payment if they will do something that they would not normally do.

For example, in some cultures it is expected that airline passengers going through customs will give the customs officer some kind of "tip" in order to process their bags without hassle. That is a bribe, although we would never use the word in front of the customs officer.

We have all heard stories of individuals arguing with a policeman about a potential speeding ticket and trying to offer some kind of bribe to have the ticket waived. These individuals often find a bribe is not only unsuccessful, it can lead to jail time.

2. Incentives

The second type of pre-agreed payment is called an incentive. This is where a supervisor will challenge people to do more than expected, and they are promised a specific payment if they do it. For a supervisor, an incentive for her crew may sound like

this: “If you beat the standard rate of production each day this week, I will give you a pizza party on Friday.”

Usually with incentives, there is no stigma associated with doing something wrong; it is merely an encouragement to do more of what is right.

Sometimes the incentives are built into a compensation plan, such that they really don't appear as separate incentives, but certainly have that same feel.

For example, commissions paid for certain levels of sales are types of incentives. They are a promise made ahead of time to pay a certain amount based on the employees performing at a certain level.

3. Rewards

When employees perform better than expected, for any number of reasons, but without a precondition agreement, supervisors may give them extra compensation after the fact. These payments are called rewards.

Often, the compensation is a token amount in recognition of the actions by the employees and are not intended to fully pay for the extra effort. Instead, they are a kind of “thank you” for going the extra mile.

The area of rewards can be a minefield, and there are numerous books on the potential mistakes when trying to reward people. For example, if a supervisor rewards an individual for a job well done, often other people feel slighted because they expended as much effort or provided more benefit to the organization than the person being rewarded. There are numerous other problems that can be devastating. It is not uncommon for well intentioned supervisors to create ill will by applying rewards poorly or non-uniformly.

4. Reinforcement

A final category is called reinforcement. Like rewards, reinforcement is something that is usually applied after actions have been taken. Reinforcement is more general than rewards. It seeks to make people feel appreciated and thanked for the things they have been doing.

Usually reinforcement takes the form of verbal or written praise as opposed to tangible gifts or direct compensation. Reinforcement takes hundreds of different forms and can be as simple as a "thank you" or as complex as a group-wide celebration.

The words discussed in this article are sometimes used inappropriately by supervisors. One might refer to what was intended as an incentive to be some kind of bribe. Or someone might think of a form of reward as being simple reinforcement. It is instructive to realize there is a difference in behavior modification between promising an incentive ahead of the act versus providing a reward after the act has been completed.

To be an accurate communicator, it is important to use the right words for each application. If one of the four words described above is used in the wrong context, it can send mixed signals about a supervisor's intent. That action will cause a lowering of trust within the organization, and it will eventually show up on the bottom line.

Be careful when using these words to use them accurately. The concepts involved in behavior modification are critical to having people experience higher motivation as a result of reinforcing actions by leaders. These things are powerful concepts, but they can be easily misused.

This is a part in a series of articles on "Successful Supervision." The entire series can be viewed on www.leadergrow.com/articles/supervision or on this blog.

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