

Punished by Rewards: The Trouble with Gold Stars, Incentive Plans, A's, Praise, and Other Bribes

Alfie Kohn

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Review by Dr. David A. McKelfresh

Alfie Kohn challenges our reliance on carrot-and-stick psychology in *Punished by Rewards: The Trouble with Gold Stars, Incentive Plans, A's, Praise, and Other Bribes*. This is an intriguing indictment of rewards at work, at school, and at home. "Do this and you'll get that," (Kohn, 1993, p. 3) summarizes the prevailing strategy for managing workers, teaching students, and raising children. Kohn contends that managers, teachers, and parents dangle goodies, from candy bars to sales commissions, in front of people in the same way a pet is trained.

Kohn destroys a universal myth in his groundbreaking work demonstrating that while manipulating people with incentives seems to work in the short run, it is a strategy that eventually fails and ultimately does lasting harm. He draws from hundreds of studies of a diverse group of students, workers and children and demonstrates that people actually do inferior work when they are lured with money, grades, or other incentives. Kohn makes the case that the more artificial inducements are used to motivate people, the more they lose interest in what they are being bribed to do.

The first six chapters, grouped under the heading "The Case Against Rewards" lay out the central argument. Chapter 1 reviews the behaviorist tradition, the prevalence of pop behaviorism in our society, and some reasons (pragmatist belief systems and orthodox economic theory) for its widespread acceptance. Chapter 2 considers arguments about the intrinsic desirability of rewarding people, first challenging the claim that doing so is morally or logically required and then proposing that there is actually something objectionable about the practice. According to Kohn, the problem is not with compensation, per se, but with using money as a reward by offering more of it for this or that. Five problems with rewards at work are discussed: 1) rewards punish, 2) rewards rupture relationships, 3) rewards ignore reasons, 4) rewards discourage risk-taking, and 5) rewards undermine interest. The more closely pay is linked to achievement, the more damage is done.

Chapter 3 focuses on practical consequences, summarizing the research evidence showing that rewards simply do not work to promote lasting behavior change or to enhance performance; many times they make attitudes and behavior worse. In chapters 4 and 5, Kohn offers five key reasons for the failure of rewards. Chapter 6 examines one particular reward few people would think to criticize: praise. Kohn argues that we need to look carefully at why we praise, how we praise, and what effects praise has over time on those receiving it.

The second half of the book, organized under the heading "Reward in Practice," examines the effect of rewards and their alternatives focusing on three issues: employees performance, students' learning, and children's behavior. This section of the book is organized in a fashion such that readers interested in only one of these topics will not have to spend time reading discussions of the other two.

Workplace issues are discussed in chapters 7 and 10, educational issues in chapters 8 and 11, and the issues of children's behavior and values in chapters 9 and 12. Kohn suggests that the issues that really matter are the three C's of motivation: choice, collaboration and content. Choice means workers should participate in making decisions about what they do. Collaboration means they should be able to work together in effective teams. Content refers to the job's tasks. "To do a good job, people need a good job to do" (Kohn, 1993, p. 189).

Kohn has produced a unsettling challenge to conventional thinking. Although some may find the evidence in the book deeply disturbing, the Skinnerian dogma that pervades our institutions needs careful reexamination. This is a helpful book for those who are currently student affairs practitioners and for graduate students studying the field. Student affairs faculty will find this book an excellent resource in a seminar on higher education administration or organizational leadership. Additionally, faculty will come to view *Punished by Rewards* as a helpful guide to creating a positive classroom environment. Kohn recommends that faculty focus on: 1) relaxing their emphasis on grades and encouraging an orientation toward learning, 2) viewing learning as discovery, 3) emphasizing cooperative learning, 4) deciding what things are worth knowing, and 5) providing students with autonomy and choice in the classroom.

Readers will come away with the strong impression that we have paid an enormous price for having accepted pop behaviorism for so long. The good news, according to Kohn, is that we can do better.

REFERENCES

Kohn, A. (1993). *Punished by rewards: The trouble with gold stars, incentive plans, A's, praise and other bribes*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company.

Dr. David A. McKelfresh ('76) is Director of Residence Life and an Assistant Professor in the Student Affairs in Higher Education Graduate Program at Colorado State University.

