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Department of Human Behavior

By Shankar Vedantam

When Play Becomes Work

By Shankar Vedantam
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It happens all the time: Two guys in a garage come up with a cool new technology -- and dream of making it big. A thousand people take time off work to campaign for a visionary politician because they feel they are doing something to change the world. A million kids hit baseballs -- and wonder what it would take to become a pro.

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When Play Becomes Work
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Then the brainiacs, volunteers and Little Leaguers grow up. What they did for fun becomes . . . work. Paychecks and bonuses become the reasons to do things. Pink slips and demotions become the reasons not to do other things.

Psychologists have long been interested in what happens when people's internal drives are replaced by external motivations. A host of experiments have shown that when threats and rewards enter the picture, they tend to destroy the inner drives. Paychecks and pink slips might be powerful reasons to get out of bed each day, but they turn out to be surprisingly ineffective -- and even counterproductive -- in getting people to perform at their best.

More than three decades ago, Edward Deci, a social and personality psychologist at the University of Rochester, found the first experimental evidence of a phenomenon with wide relevance to the way most Americans conduct their personal, professional and social lives.

Deci tracked a bunch of college students who were solving puzzles for fun. He divided them into two groups. One group was allowed to keep solving puzzles as before. People in the other were offered a small financial reward for each puzzle they solved.

The psychologist later evaluated the volunteers: He found that people given a financial incentive were now less interested in solving puzzles on their own time. Although these people had earlier been just as eager as those in the other group, offering an external incentive seemed to kill their internal drive.

"They thought of it as something they really enjoy and like to do, but now they do it in order to get money, and they think of the task as an instrument to get money and not an activity that has value in its own right," Deci said. "Human beings both want to -- and, in a deeper way, need to -- feel a sense of being autonomous. When someone else begins to seduce you into behaving with an offer of a reward, it takes away your sense of being autonomous. Now you are doing it for someone else."

Rewards and punishments guide the lives of most Americans. Young children are given stars for putting away their toys, kids earn a few bucks for mowing the lawn, and teens are told they will be grounded if they get in trouble. For adults, stock options, raises, demotions and firings become different kinds of carrots and sticks.

Beliefs about the utility of rewards and punishments in motivating human behavior are deeply ingrained, and most people don't know that more than 100 research studies have

shown that motivating people in this manner can have the unintentional effect of undermining their internal drives.

The striking thing about the research, said Roland Benabou, an economist at the Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs at Princeton University, is that it is so starkly at odds with bedrock economic principles.

"A central tenet of economics is that individuals respond to incentives," Benabou noted in one research study. "For psychologists and sociologists, in contrast, rewards and punishments are often counterproductive, because they undermine intrinsic motivation."

But rewards and punishments are not always counterproductive, Benabou said. He drew a distinction between mundane tasks and those that carry meaning for people. In the first case, Benabou argued, rewards and punishments work exactly the way economists predict: They get people to do things.

External rewards and punishments are counterproductive when it comes to activities that are meaningful -- tasks that telegraph something about a person's intellectual abilities, generosity, courage or values. People will voluntarily perform intellectually arduous work, for example, because it gives them pleasure to solve a puzzle or win a game of wits.

"If I pay my kids to do their homework, I am saying, 'You will get this if you do your homework,' but I am also saying, 'Homework is not likely to have intrinsic rewards,' " Benabou said. To the extent that a child is doing homework because he or she enjoys the challenge, or wants to demonstrate intelligence and diligence, the homework has meaning beyond the task itself, and Benabou predicts that offering a reward will backfire.

Deci's research into the counterproductive effects of threats and rewards has been replicated among high school students learning verbal skills, preschoolers trying to draw, and adults targeted by weight-loss, anti-smoking and traffic safety programs. In each case, external threats and rewards made it less likely that people would feel internally fired up about the goal.

So why are rewards and punishments employed so liberally?

"People like it because it is easy," Deci said. "It is easy to offer a reward, but it is not easy to help people find their own motivation."

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