Safety Rewards and Incentives that Result in Safety Improvements



Used correctly, safety rewards and incentives can be very effective. Rewards foster accountability. Rewarding people for positive things gets them to do those things. It's basic human behavior. People *want* to get caught doing the right thing. These principles should be used to improve safety performance.

Selecting the Right Rewards

Different levels of an organization should be rewarded for different things. The reward should be tailored to the result the individual can control. Thus, rewards for people at lower levels should be based primarily on activities rather than organizational results. It's pointless to base a front-line shiftworker's reward on the accident statistics of an entire organization because individual shiftworkers don't control organization-wide injury statistics.

It's equally pointless to reward front-line workers based on outcomes within their own small groups. For instance, a group of 6 workers that experienced no lost-time injuries didn't necessarily work more safely than a similar-sized group that had one injury. Accident rates among small groups are statistically unreliable and should not be the basis for rewards.

By contrast, rewards for upper level managers should be based on organizational results. Still, even upper managers should have some part of their reward tied to activities. For example, some companies base 80% of an executive's reward on results and 20% on activities. This acknowledges the symbolic value of upper management activity—upper management must be seen *doing* things to promote health and safety if the rest of the organization is to believe that health and safety is really a priority.

The secret to giving safety rewards that really motivate is simple: ask people what they want. Find out what it's going to take to get them to do what you want. Try to tailor awards as much as possible so that you get maximum motivational effect for each individual.

Safety Rewards Are Not One-Size-Fits-All

What's motivational to one individual might hold no allure for somebody else. So the hard part about individualizing awards is that it requires you to take the time to get to know each person.

But that’s really not such a bad thing. As the baby boomers age, it will become harder to attract and retain good people. In our lifetime the day will come that workers will start interviewing *us*. This is going to place a premium on getting to know each one of your workers.

Consistency and treating everybody the same are often cited as worthy management qualities. And to a large extent they are. But not always. It’s okay to treat people differently when you ask them what they want. Workers understand that you’re making the effort to find out what’s important to *them*. In fact, you can and should have fun with the process.

Of course, the reward system must also be perceived as (and actually be) fair and equitable. Keep in mind that money isn’t necessarily the best incentive. Study after study demonstrates that the reward people tend to value most is private and personal recognition from their supervisors and peers.

Ineffective v. Effective Rewards

Ineffective rewards are generally characterized by the following qualities:

- Delays between earning and receiving;
- Weak link between incentive and behavior; and
- Lack value to the recipient.

By contrast, effective rewards are usually:

- Reinforced frequently;
- Provided immediately after they’re earned;
- Earned by safe behavior on a daily basis;
- Of value to the recipient; and
- Accompanied by some form of celebration.

Safety rewards can come in different shapes and sizes and don’t need to have a huge monetary value. There’s a famous story about a Hewlett Packard employee who burst into his manager’s office with the solution to a stubborn problem. The manager, desperate to acknowledge the achievement, awarded the employee with the only item at hand—a banana from the manager’s lunch. Ever since, the Golden Banana has become a highly coveted award for HP employees.

Ego Safety Rewards—Recognition and Praise

Be sure to praise people for a job well done. Just about everybody responds positively to praise. However, you need to vary how you deliver praise and recognition to get the most positive response from each individual. For one worker, a quiet word of acknowledgement works best; others want public recognition, like having their picture hung on the bulletin board.

When your company’s safety culture is shaped right, the culture itself becomes the reward system and the reward people strive for is peer acceptance.

Reward with Opportunities

For highly motivated people, the reward that works best isn’t money or a gift; it’s opportunity. One example of an effective reward for people in this group is allowing them to choose the projects they work on.

Tangible Rewards

Tangible rewards can include:

- Bonuses;
- Parties/celebrations;
- Points redeemable for a prize;
- Time off.

If you have only limited resources for rewards, you might be best served allowing individuals to select their own prize. The most successful tangible reward initiative I ever ran involved giving the winner $20 to spend on whatever prize he wanted. The program was a huge hit!

Group Rewards

When rewards are by group performance, make the reward *available* to each member in the group. But availability isn't the same thing as receiving. To earn the reward, each person in the group must show what he or she did to help the group meet the objective.

This is called the participation criterion and it's a great way to eliminate stragglers and free riders and secure universal participation in the desired activity and outcome.

Conclusion

Whatever system you use, choose your rewards wisely. If you give away a car or truck this year, what will your reward be next year? That's one advantage of using celebrations or parties as rewards. In addition to being recyclable, the celebration reinforces the positive safety message.