

Psychologist Insight - Number 2

Reward or punish - which gets the best out of staff?

Most managers who work in organisations regularly have to face the question of how to reinforce or extinguish the positive or negative behaviours that they see in their staff. Most of the time this is not a major issue given that all staff will have some set of given tasks and procedures to perform, and targets and objectives to meet and, with suitable support, guidance and training, will work to achieve these.

On the other hand, it is quite clear from our research at Good Boss that some managers have a particular style or approach when it comes to interacting with their staff in terms of reward and punishment. At the top end of the Rewarding scale one can identify the behaviours of "acknowledges and praises the work of their staff, treats their staff with care and respect". At the opposite end of this scale one sees the behaviours "Intimidates others to get results, fails to acknowledge good work, uses sarcasm, openly criticises staff". The question is which is the best approach to use to get results?

As part of our on-going research we asked 120 staff, who had a range of perceptions about their particular manager's rewarding or punishing style, a series of additional questions about the impact of this behaviour on them. The results were very interesting

In all instances staff who had bosses who were more punishing than rewarding said that they were much more likely to think or act in the following ways:

- Take fake "sick" days
- Work less hard than I could have done
- Look for another job
- Resign
- Complain about my boss to my peers
- Complain about my boss to his or her superiors
- Complain to my boss about his or her behaviour

All these results had correlations running at values from 0.26 to 0.46 and all were highly statistically significant.

In looking at more positive criteria, staff who had bosses who were more rewarding than punishing were much more likely to think or act in the following ways:

- Praise my boss to other colleagues
- Let my boss know how happy I am to be working for him or her

Both of these results had correlations running at values from 0.20 to 0.40 and both were statistically significant.

It was most interesting to see that the criterion "Work harder than strictly necessary" did not seem to be affected by positive good boss behaviour. (The correlation here was actually zero). Maybe this was an issue that reflected more on the character of the staff themselves, for example, the extent to which they were "Conscientious" or not, as measured by the "Big Five" personality construct.

The main conclusion is therefore that being a Rewarding manager isn't necessarily going to increase the level of additional work completed, but will stop staff from taking such destructive action as taking off fake sick days, working less hard than they could have, looking for another job and/or resigning.

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