Positive Leader Feedback Drives Intrinsic Motivation

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Do Your Leaders Use Positive Feedback to Drive Intrinsic Motivation?

Someone shared the 'no feedback, no motivation' phrase with me when I was speaking at an IISE conference a few years ago. Today, I share it with others because of its powerful and logical message.

How can someone expect us to improve, in the right performance areas, if we do not receive enough meaningful feedback about our current performance? What types of feedback do you get from your boss from week to week?

How does that feedback affect your motivation level? What types of feedback do you give the people that depend on you for leadership, either at work or away from work? **Positive leader feedback drives intrinsic motivation.**

The Feedback - Motivation - Service Connection

Think about the actions we need to take if we want service to improve. I like to use the 'restaurant customer' analogy to help illustrate this point.

Often, we expect restaurant service to improve. However, the tip amount is the only feedback we provide to the waiter or waitress. We expect the relative value of the tip versus the 15 percent norm to serve as our key indicator of customer satisfaction or dissatisfaction.

While a less than average tip might indicate dissatisfaction, it does not provide much usable feedback to the service provider.

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How does the service provider know where improvements need to be made? Where in the restaurant supply chain do process errors occur?

Rarely do we communicate our expectations to our servers. We don't tell them that the value of their tip depends on the speed of their service and the number of times they refill the water glass. They may not realize that the friendliness they display during the meal affects the tip amount.

Instead, we leave the table, and possible, a tip. However, we fail to give feedback specific to our performance expectations.

We leave the server to decide why the tip was so small. How do they know what actions to take with future customers to increase the potential for a better tip?

Positive Feedback and Intrinsic Motivation in the Workplace

How often do we repeat poor leadership behavior in our organizations? How often do we fail to define expectations up front and provide specific feedback as to how well those expectations are being satisfied? The message here is simple. No positive feedback, no positive intrinsic motivation.

In fact, Dr. W. Edwards Deming said years ago that 'the prevailing system of management had destroyed our people." All too often, we expect performance to improve as the result of a new memo or a three-minute staff meeting tirade.

If that does not work, we may sentence our poor performers to a day of training. Eight hours of lecture will surely somehow ignite their desire for future improvement.

Could you improve your putting skills in golf if you could not see the path of the ball as it nears and then goes into (or by) the cup? How long would your motivation level remain high without such visual feedback?

"Simple systems, great results!"

"The first step on the road to high performance begins with a choice."

Now, add a coach who seems to primarily focus on your weaknesses. They give you feedback only in a manner that Mr. Spacely could appreciate. Would you continue to improve? How motivated would you be to even try to improve?

How Negative Feedback Destroys Intrinsic Motivation

Negative feedback, especially when it is delivered in an emotional manner, is not useful. Such feedback never reaches the part of the brain where learning truly occurs. Instead, we go into survival mode.

The limbic system diverts the unpleasant stimulus to the 'fight or flight' portion of our brain. Important content fails to make it into the neocortex. The learning portion of our brain shuts down to give us as much mental capacity as possible for protection.

That's enough of a biology lesson. In general, leaders often fail to define expectations clearly. Plus, they often give only limited feedback relative to peoples' performance against those expectations.
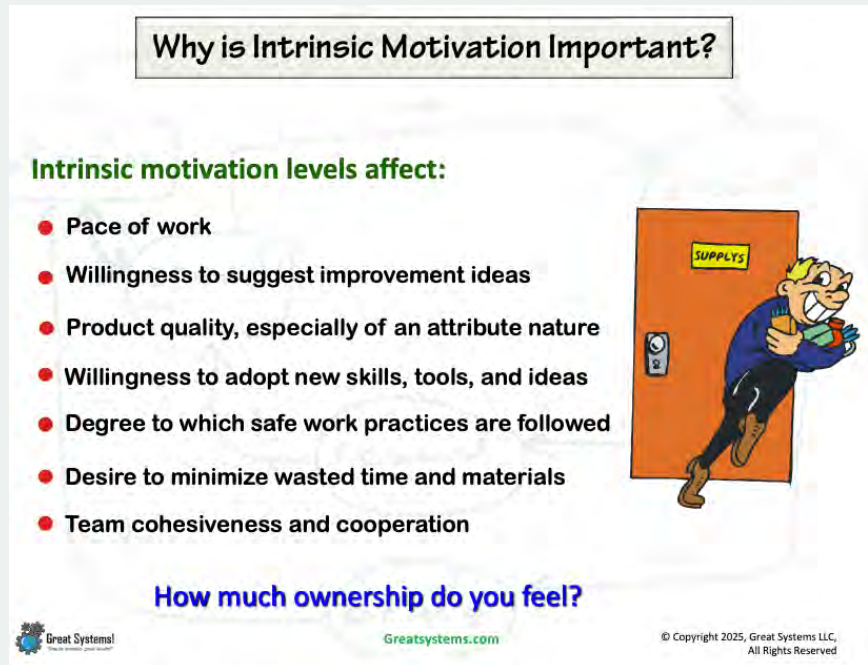

When we do give feedback, it is often of a negative nature. This form of feedback serves little purpose (other than to demotivate people).

Despite these shortcomings, we still expect people to improve. We expect them to have the motivation to help us achieve our (and hopefully their) performance goals. Like the waiter who never seems to get better at keeping the water glass full, our staff just doesn't seem to get it.

Maybe we, as leaders and coaches, are the ones who just don't get it. No feedback, no motivation.

How Negative Feedback Destroys Intrinsic Motivation

The solutions to this motivation problem seem obvious enough: define performance expectations up front, provide positive and frequent feedback specific to those expectations, and avoid using emotionally charged, negative feedback. If the solutions are so obvious, why isn't there more motivation to apply them? The excuses are often as apparent as the solutions.

We don't have time, we have our own Mr. Spacelys who won't let up on us, and our staff wouldn't listen to us anyway. Sounds like a vicious cycle, doesn't it? That is why this four-word quote is so powerful.

It defines a systems constraint, and it indicates a personal choice requirement. Motivation will not occur without feedback. If we give out the wrong kind of feedback, we are likely to motivate people in the wrong direction.

On the other hand, there is promise in learning to give effective feedback. It will help us to motivate people in the proper manner. Daily, positive, consistent, and meaningful feedback from a leader is a powerful performance enhancing 'drug.'

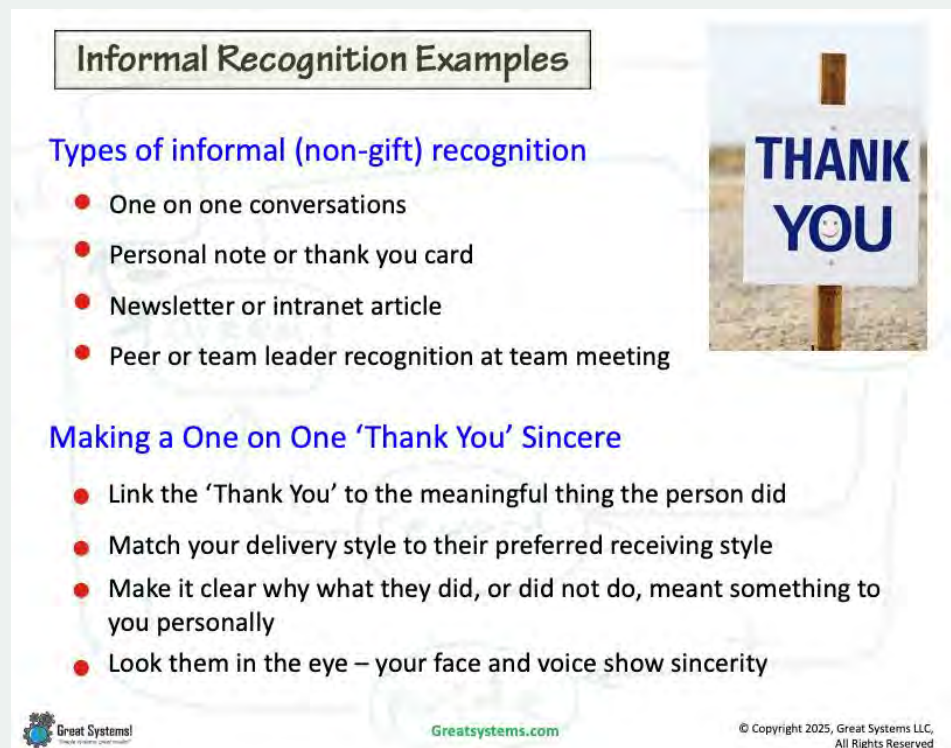## Explore Your Own Positive Feedback - Intrinsic Motivation Connection

The hardest part about learning to give better feedback is looking more closely at ourselves. We give people feedback whenever we are around them – whether we say anything to them or not.

Our e-mails, text messages, video calls, message board postings, a passing glance, and not saying something when something should have been said, in addition to our spoken words, are all forms of feedback that we give to our people.

We give a lot of people feedback every day. However, do we give them the right feedback, in the right manner? Do we really motivate them to do what we want, and need, on a consistent basis? How high is your 'desire to improve' motivation level?

WATCH my 'Alternatives to Discipline' video on my Great Systems YouTube channel

About the author

As Chief Excellence Officer of Great Systems LLC, Kevin McManus provides virtual coaching and content to help people use proven best practices to enhance and optimize their daily work systems.

Over forty years of work experience in roles such as Industrial Engineer, Training Manager, Production Manager, Plant Manager, and Director of Quality give Kevin a 'real life work' perspective relative to daily work process optimization, work team engagement and empowerment, and sustainable operational excellence.

As a contract trainer for the TapRooT® root cause analysis process, Kevin has taught over 450 courses and further enhanced his ability to help leaders proactively minimize risk, reduce errors, and improve reliability. Kevin holds an undergraduate degree in Industrial Engineering and an MBA. He served as a national Malcolm Baldrige Performance Excellence Award Examiner for twenty years, including a three-year term on the national Judge's Panel.

Kevin has authored the monthly performance improvement column for Industrial and Systems Engineer magazine for over 20 years, is an Institute of Industrial and Systems Engineering Fellow and has been a member of IISE for over forty years. His newest book, "Different Company – How the Best Build Great Organizations", will be published in late 2025.

If you would like more information about the improvement tools and systems I have to offer, please send me an e-mail at **kevin@greatsystems.com.**

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