



Shades of Pink

By Aubrey Daniels

A friend recently sent me an article from the N.Y. Times by Bruce Feiler ([Train a Parent, Spare a Child](#)). The title is quite fitting since it is the parents who create the environment and the contingencies of reinforcement that shape the child’s behavior. However, the article is really about how bribing children is a bad thing. He relies uncritically on Dan Pink, author of *Drive*, for advice on effective parenting, concluding, “So I got it: Bribing is bad.” Feiler seems to use the popular definition of the word bribe, meaning to give some tangible reward, money, desserts, or privileges to get behavior that the child “should want to do.”

Wise teachers and parents pair the reward with actions that convey their approval and pleasure so that the child learns to associate doing good with goodwill from others.

– Aubrey Daniels

It sounds nasty and without concern for the ethical development of the child—a bad word indeed. However, the rationale for generalizing to rewards as bad, not intrinsically driven, is a big unexamined leap.

Feiler states in his article that, “More recently, Daniel Pink, in his best-selling book, *Drive*, reviewed four decades of research and concluded that offering short-term incentives to elicit behavior is unreliable, ineffective and causes **considerable long-term damage**.” This is clearly not the case! And I emphatically state that if anything creates *considerable long-term damage* it is the conclusions and recommendations Pink is presenting to his audiences. Feiler may well expect that findings presented as derived from research are indeed true, but let’s take a moment to explore just what Pink is promoting.

From the lectures I have attended and from his videos of speeches, I find many of Dan Pink’s facts and conclusions about changes going on in the world to be quite interesting. It is when he begins to advise on matters of motivation that I become distressed—distracted may be a better word. Distracted because of how quickly people accept Pink’s recommendations, advice, and admonitions about motivation with little knowledge or questions about the studies on which they are based. I have spent a lifetime studying motivation and its applications. In that lifetime I have always wanted to understand how the research was conducted and what conclusions were drawn from it, so I have looked hard at the data from which Pink derives his statements and found it wanting.

Pink, and Alfie Kohn before him, accepted the research of Edward Deci and Paul Ryan as the definitive work on motivation. It is definitively *not* the definitive case. As Eisenberger and Shanock (2003)¹ state, “Three decades of research have failed to produce general



agreement concerning the effects of reward on creativity.” They end their review of the research of the two positions which they call Romanticism and Behaviorism with a finding that can be embraced by saying “Encouragement of creativity, in the form of tangible and socioemotional rewards, strengthens creative motivational orientations.”

What most people listening to Pink and reading his books fail to see is that his own position is inconsistent. He allows that rewards work under some circumstances but does not specify the precise conditions. He does say in a number of ways that the “If...then” provision of rewards (If you do A, then you will get B) are clearly not effective in maximizing motivation. What does he mean? I can tell you that “if” the behaviors and results are clearly specified and when the “then” is a positive reinforcer then there are literally hundreds

of cases, research, and real work situations where they are clearly effective.

So much of what we learn, although not verbally labeled as “if...then” is clearly what it is, nonetheless. When a child smiles and gets a smile back or ties his/her shoe and the mother said *hooray* or cleaned up one’s room and got to go to a party with friends are all “if...then” events. Learning and doing are surrounded by rewards and punishers and to separate out the value of one type of reward over another is to fail to understand the unique and powerful impacts they have on us as human beings.



If there is no impact then the *thing*—words or candy or social inclusion—is not a *reward*. Rewards are defined by their effects. No effect indicates that what was offered as a reward was not one. It is simply an indication that it was not valued by the receiver. To say that a person digging a ditch is motivated by “if...then” rewards but an executive completing a merger is motivated by higher level consequences, or Motivation 2.0 as Pink calls it, is demeaning to both. Everyone is motivated by both. The ditch digger can feel pride in

how straight he dug the ditch or how quickly he finished the job; the executive can say that since the deal is completed, s/he not only feels satisfaction but will now pop the cork on the champagne and celebrate with the office.

When my daughter was young, she loved nothing better than a smiley face or sticker on a poster when she had completed a household task or school assignment. It made her happy as she tried to do these things again and again. I know she felt happy (a higher order emotional effect) because of her jumping for joy as the sticker, or smiley face, was given to her to place on the chart. Of course, wise teachers and parents pair the reward with actions that convey their approval and pleasure so that the child learns to associate doing *good* with goodwill from others. Over time that wanting to do good takes on its own reinforcing properties but the form of the reward can be as trivial as a sticker or as noble as saving the planet, protecting the environment, advancing international cooperation, or as humble as a smile from an impoverished woman in Africa who has been taught how to start a micro business.

Rewarding does not exclude the wonderful capability of a person (child or adult) to replay the conditions surrounding the reward and through self-talk which adds to the reward a socially relevant or values-based *story*. A child does not work to only get tangibles. In the early years as we learn new tasks, we do hope that people around us shape us with kindness, that they reward our efforts and take great delight in small steps. It is in the accomplishment that we begin to build a repertoire for success. We then are able to talk about what motivates us and it is often full of terms reflecting feelings, thoughts, and memories. These feelings, thoughts, and memories take on self-reinforcing properties and it is through this relationship between actions and events



with the pairing of a variety of rewards that we develop a growing awareness of how to reproduce them in our everyday activities. Every day we are faced with “if-then” situations of the highest or most routine nature:

If I work hard at this project, my team will be happy and celebrate my success. I can feel good about myself and will want to do more next time;

If I pick up my toys, I can then both have time to go play with my friends and feel good about helping my parents;

If I go to work today, I will get paid;

If I marry the girl of my dreams, I will have a better life than without her.

Doing good work in contingent relationships helps to demonstrate that one cares about the world around us, (i.e., the effects brought about by our behavior on our world and the impact on those we care about).

There is NOTHING wrong with if-then relationships. They are just one kind of reward mechanism that causes us to select out the things we do every day. They build habits that we call character. Although sometimes they are to avoid or escape some aversive conse-

quence, they are at no time in themselves demeaning. Accepting an offer to speak is an example of “if...then.” We cannot know if Pink or others would talk for free as they may express delight in the opportunity to talk as even more valuable than the pay—but whether they are free or paid they are still an “if-then” contingency—and it does nothing to harm his motivation and it, a paid speech, is no less valuable than a speech given for free.

Deci explains this apparent inconsistency by saying it is how the contingency is communicated that is important. Asking people in a nice way to do something adds another dimension to the factors that spell motivation, but simply doing something because you understand the *if-then* contingency of showing up to work to get pay is not on its surface, or even deep down, any less motivating. Motivation is defined by what happens to behavior, not by the intention of others. My showing up for work because of this contingent



relationship of work to pay is as genuine and real as showing up for work because I love work. Both things can operate. The contingency does nothing to harm the relationship between how you feel and what you do. While saying “pretty please” may signal more benefits for doing what is requested, there are some relationships in which no amount of begging or pleading will be motivating.

As Deci and Ryan (1999)² say,

As research has shown, there are conditions under which tangible rewards do not necessarily undermine intrinsic motivation, but the evidence indicates clearly that strategies that focus primarily on the use of extrinsic rewards do, indeed, run a serious risk of diminishing rather than promoting intrinsic motivation.

If they mean by intrinsic motivation, repeated effort or doing something again and again in the absence of visible reward, then they are making the concept way too obscure and basically untrue. Rewards operate whether visible or not.

In the Science of Behavior (Behavior Analysis) the technical term for *if...then* is Premack Principle, named for David Premack, longtime professor at the University of Pennsylvania. There have probably been 1,000 research studies investigating the Premack Principle in the widest range of human conditions. In none of these that I know of have there been a demonstration of the effects predicted by Deci, et. al.

If it was in the days of the Old West Pink and I might have to settle this argument on the streets of Laredo in a face to face shoot-out—a High-Noon showdown. However, I suggest a more reasonable and effective way. Let Pink take one organization, or a part of one, to apply his “technology” and I will take a comparable one. Then we will be able to see

where the “considerable long-term damage” occurs. We have one company that has been using the *if...then* approach for 34 years and today are at the top of their industry in company performance, customer satisfaction, and HR measures. I am confident.

Let me return to Mr. Feiler’s problem. He starts his article with the following:

I find the issue of bribing children—or to be more precise, the giving of blunt, uncreative rewards for desired behavior (‘If you just stop kicking that seat in front of you on the plane, I’ll give you 10 minutes of iPad time’; ‘Clean your room this weekend, I’ll give you 10 bucks’; ‘if you use good manners at Grandma’s house, I’ll let you have an extra brownie’)—to be one of the more nagging challenges of being a parent.



The problem in each of these cases is not in the reward (bribe as he calls it) or in the level of motivation as Mr. Pink states; it is the conditions, or more technically, the contingencies of reinforcement. These are no more of a bribe than saying, “if you work here we will pay you a monthly salary.” That is a reward contingency. A lot of the time it is a poorly managed contingency as the person does only enough to stay on the payroll and gets his/her full salary.

In the case of the kicking, you would be inadvertently rewarding kicking the seat since in order to get more iPad time, you would have to start kicking so that you could stop. If success was to stop the kicking, it would not work. It is a case of rewarding the wrong behavior. The contingency might be better stated as “If you can sit still for 10 minutes, you can use the iPad for 10 minutes.” Clean-

ing the room would work if the child needed \$10 and the only way to get it was to clean the room. By pairing a clean room with lots of social reinforcement, the child would eventually create a habit that would last a life time –without the \$10, believe it or not.

At our consultancy, ADI, we have trained thousands of clients, who are also parents, over the last 35 years, to solve these problems satisfactorily for all parties concerned. As a matter of fact many children who were taught household and educational responsibilities as well as good manners by using “if... then” are now using it to teach their children these same socially responsible behaviors.

Bad manners and rude behavior are pet peeves of mine. I recall some studies that show that people with good manners are

routinely happier and financially more successful than those who are rude and selfish. Rewarding children for thanking Grandmother or saying *please* and *thank you* is not only effective, it is just good parenting.

REFERENCES

¹ Eisenberger, R. and Shanock, L. (2003) Rewards, Intrinsic Motivation, and Creativity: A Case Study of Conceptual and Methodological Isolation, *Creativity Research Journal*, Vol. 15, Nos. 2 & 3, 121–130.

²Deci and Ryan (1999) A Meta-Analytic Review of Experiments Examining the Effects of Extrinsic Rewards on Intrinsic Motivation *Psychological Bulletin*, Vol. 125, No. 6, 627-6 (<http://www.psychologytoday.com>)

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[About the Author]

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Aubrey is a thought leader and expert on management, leadership, safety and workplace issues. For the past 40 years, he has been dedicated to helping people and organiza-

tions apply the laws of human behavior to optimize performance. Aubrey is the author of *Bringing Out the Best in People*, *Oops! 13 Management Practices That Waste Time and Money (and what to do instead)*, *Safe by Accident? Leadership Practices that Build a Sustainable Safety Culture* and three other business books. When Aubrey is not working on changing the way the world works, he enjoys golf and spending time with his family.

[About the Institute]

The Aubrey Daniels Institute is dedicated to increasing the understanding of and advancing the use of the science of behavior. It is a depository of information, research, examples, and resources gathered together to support the powerful application of applied behavior analysis and is intended to be a place for exploring topics that are critical to Dr. Aubrey C. Daniels' vision of changing the way the world works.

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