



## THE GLOBE AND MAIL

December 5, 2009

### The perils of carrot and stick

By SUSAN PINKER  
From Saturday's Globe and Mail

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**Dear Susan,**

I manage a call centre where the employees include students, immigrants, part-time workers and people laid off from other sectors. My problem is turnover. About a month after the 10-day training period ended, many of the new sales force has quit. By reducing the hourly rate slightly for new hires (it's still over minimum wage), I plan to give bonuses to agents who maintain a high call volume - but they can only collect after six months on the job. My friend says this is manipulative. What's your take?

-W.E.

**Dear W.E.,**

I'm with your friend. It might work in the short term but will backfire in the long term. Those who make sales targets might feel resentful if circumstances change and they are unable to collect their rewards.

And the research is clear that employees who feel hoodwinked are most prone to sabotage. The push-back can be serious - as in theft or vandalism. Or it can prompt little acts of rebellion, such as the time a Bell Canada call agent sympathized about a billing error by telling me she thought the company was cheating her, too.

Even if they can focus their sights on a single, concrete goal, the staff who have the staying power may not be the ones you want. Would you want to reach a call agent who, while hustling for that carrot, gives you the bum's rush, aggressively "up-sells" a product you just said you don't want, and repeatedly puts you on hold so he or she can take other calls? You may get employees to hang on a bit longer, but your customer base will hemorrhage.

Fixating on an end date is not an enduring form of motivation anyway, says business analyst and author Dan Pink, who argues that, past a basic threshold, rewards and punishments can have a subversive effect.

"The science shows that the secret to high performance isn't our biological drive, or our reward-and-punishment drive, but our third drive - our deep-seated desire to direct our own lives, to extend and expand our abilities, and to live a life of purpose," he writes in his upcoming book, *Drive: The Surprising Truth About What Motivates Us*.

I sought out Mr. Pink after hearing a riveting talk during which he challenged the idea that, to motivate people, all you have to do is reward them with an attractive payoff.

He agrees that people want and need feedback - not to mention a decent base salary. But he says that if you explicitly trigger a short-term, concrete payoff, people will often act in shortsighted ways. "A better move than offering incentives is to create a work environment where people want to stay, where they don't have to work in a lockstep, routine."

As an example, he mentioned airline JetBlue Airways, which achieved better staff retention by letting call staff work at some days from home.

"What the research shows is that autonomy is a part of human nature," Mr. Pink said, quoting a study by two business professors at New York University and the University of Michigan showing that hospital cleaners who see their jobs as part of a broader endeavour, say, of promoting patient well-being or making nurses' lives easier, enjoy their work more and stick around longer than those who see their jobs as just sweeping the floor.

But does this hold true for us all, even casual workers like the ones you employ? To get a worker's take, I asked a former call agent. As one of many jobs he's tried, Dominic Vocisano started working in call centres after an injury prevented him from taking full-time work.

"The hours were flexible, the work was pleasant and I needed part-time hours," says the Montrealer.

Still, he remembers it as the only job he's ever had where he was disciplined for initiative - for staying on a call after his shift had officially ended - and where he was given a dressing down for taking more time with a loyal customer than the maximum expected.

So what kept him talking into his headset for two and half years? "I think what motivated many of us was the human contact, and the sense that we were helping people," he said, adding that, along with the social aspect, the ability to trade shifts attracted the students.

But managers scratched this flexibility when the call centre grew, and posted maximum call times. The goal was clear: Make as many sales as you can in the shortest time possible.

And that's when the most motivated, self-directed employees simply turned on their heels and walked out the door.

*Susan Pinker is a psychologist and author of [The Sexual Paradox: Extreme Men, Gifted Women and the Real Gender Gap](#). Read her blog at [psychologytoday.com/blog/the-open-mind](http://psychologytoday.com/blog/the-open-mind). Send questions to: [spinker@globeandmail.com](mailto:spinker@globeandmail.com) [[spinker@globeandmail.com](mailto:spinker@globeandmail.com)]. No attachments please.*

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