



By KIMBERLY ALYN, Ph.D.

Become a “Dopamine Dealer”

How Dishing Out Random Rewards Can Cause Morale to Improve

People need positive reinforcement. As the English author, art critic and social thinker John Ruskin said, “The highest reward for a man’s toil is not what he gets for it, but what he becomes by it.”

Rewarding people for good behavior as a first choice instead of punishing bad behavior creates better results. There are, of course, circumstances where bad behavior is not going away and if positive reward systems for good behavior have failed, you cannot ignore the need to punish bad behavior. In fact, studies show that employees want a just and fair environment where punishment is used when positive reinforcement has failed.

So if rewards are good, are random rewards or predictable and systematic rewards better? Random rewards are better. Systematic rewards cause an expectation and sometimes even an entitlement mentality. Random rewards cause higher levels of dopamine to be released. Dopamine is a catecholamine neurotransmitter in the central nervous system that among other things helps to regulate movement and emotion. Dopamine plays a large role in the pleasure reward pathways of your brain. A release of dopamine can cause a person to feel a sense of bliss and general well-being. Lower levels of dopamine can cause many problems including depression, loss of satisfaction, and an inability to pay attention or focus.

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A study using monkeys was conducted at Concordia University in Canada. The researchers were attempting to detect and measure dopamine releases and fluctuations associated with risk/reward tasks. In this study, a computer screen flashed different color visuals to the monkeys. When certain colors were shown, the monkey received a reward of a drop of syrup.

The experiment was performed three ways. In the first experiment, the researchers rewarded the monkey every time the monitor showed the reward color. In the second experiment, the monkey never received a reward, regardless of what showed on the computer screen. In the third experiment, the monkey received a random reward 50% of the time the reward color showed up on the computer screen.

With the first experiment, the dopamine levels rose only the first few times the monkey received the reward. The monkey became accustomed to getting the reward, so the dopamine neurons stopped firing. In the second experiment, the dopamine levels initially rose because the monkey expected to receive a reward when the reward color presented itself. However, after realizing the reward was not coming, the dopamine levels were unchanged.

In the third experiment, dopamine

levels in the monkey rose every time the reward color was shown, but the reward was given randomly. When the monkey actually received a reward, the dopamine neurons fired strongly and released a surge of dopamine. The use of random rewards caused a constant release of dopamine in the brain and a surge of dopamine when a reward was received.

Now let’s relate it to you, the fire service leader. Think of yourself as a “dopamine dealer.” When you dish out random rewards, you cause dopamine levels to rise. Conversely, if your followers expect rewards that are not given, dopamine levels will plummet, which in turn makes employees feel down and frustrated. By creating a working environment where rewards are not expected or anticipated, but provided randomly, people will associate you with rewards and dopamine levels could rise just from the environment you create. Then when you actually provide the random reward, the dopamine levels of your followers could surge.

Higher dopamine levels means higher morale, a better sense of well-being and an occasional feeling of bliss. Dopamine causes people to feel a sense of happiness. Studies show that people who are happy solve more problems and come up with more new ideas on what action should be taken in a given situation.

It is also noteworthy that studies have shown people who achieve more have higher levels of naturally released dopamine than people who achieve less. As you strive to be a better leader and inspire people to achieve more, helping their natural flow of dopamine could assist you in the process.

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