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Employee of the Month programs - how to upset everyone

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Managers frequently tell me that their Employee of the Month (EoM) program works. It's one of the most common motivational tools around, yet it violates all principles of effective reinforcement. Sure, it's easy for managers to do, but it does more harm than good.

If you believe that doing something once a month – or only 12 times a year – is going to get your people motivated, think again.

Here are just a few of the problems with EoM:

- **Only one person is recognised.** So what happens to other employees? They view their performance as insignificant.
- **It's a turn off for some employees.** Not everyone likes the attention of winning EoM, and for some 'winners' it's a shallow accolade ("It was my turn anyway.")
- **It reduces the opportunity for real recognition.** With so few employees being recognised, others may give up. ("What's the point, there can only be one EoM.")
- **Future desired behaviour is less likely.** Based on behavioural science, if you use EoM as a motivator, your employees may initially think of it as something they want and strive for, and then become de-motivated and stop trying. The recognition quickly loses its motivational power.
- **It creates internal competition.** EoM doesn't motivate people at the bottom to improve or those at the top to reach higher. Unfortunately, it often creates enmity between those ranked higher and those rated lower.

So what are the alternatives?

Create a workplace where everyone can feel good about what they do every single day. With this kind of initiative, everyone can get involved.

Set criteria for recognition. Mary Kay Company has the most widely recognised symbol of achievement in the corporate world: the pink Cadillac. Management's objective is that everyone gets a pink Cadillac. The more people have it the better the company does.

Establish an internal Facebook, where everyone shares accomplishments, family, interests, etc. By knowing more about others, you will naturally

have more opportunities to find the right reinforcers and create a positive reinforcement culture.

Design incentive schemes based on good performance. Pay for performance systems needs to be contingent on the contribution that people make to the organisation. This measures behaviour and directly reinforces the employee to do better.

To be effective, positive reinforcement must be:

- **immediate** – so the performer understands the value you place on good performance, is motivated by your expectations and will want to repeat that behaviour
- **personal** – provide a meaningful and valued incentive to affect future performance
- **frequent** – the more an employee is reinforced, the more the behaviour will be repeated.

Employee motivation is all about getting employees to their full potential; doing more than what is required. We set up human resource departments to mobilise people so we can ultimately improve bottom line results. However, so many practices have been institutionalised through the years that it is no wonder managers don't think twice before adopting them. Are your workplace initiatives truly driving motivation? Are you reinforcing your employees and improving bottom line results for your company organisation?

Extract from *OOPs: 13 Management Practices that Waste Time and Money*, Aubrey Daniels, Performance Management Publications, 2009. aubreydaniels.com / viafrontiers.com ■

