

toward a positive lifestyle

Gerald T. Kowitz

A positive lifestyle develops over a period of time. Its roots are in childhood, but it begins to take identifiable form in adolescence. Programs to help develop youth rely heavily on incentives. These in turn, help generate motivational styles. Positive motivational styles are based on value systems. Growing from value systems is a personal theory of attribution of how events occur in our personal world.

Motivational Styles

Traditionally, the role of motivation in changing human behavior has been categorized into two varieties: intrinsic and extrinsic. Few who have used this system have said good things about extrinsic motivation. Many have proposed that the extrinsic is undesirable and probably harmful. It's alleged to be cheap, materialistic, and often tawdry. Intrinsic motivation in contrast, is usually presented as the golden goal. It implies a rational control over personal behavior and suggests that the greatest personal glories will emerge from the desires and intentions that arise from meditation and an examined personal value system.

Unfortunately, few of the analyses have bothered to indicate that the highly valued intrinsic motivations are, in fact, learned patterns. The patterns were developed through the application of extrinsic motivators. Today, they would be labeled "incentives." In fact, recent summaries of motivational analyses, such as the one by Maehr and Sjogren,¹ *identified extrinsic motivation with incentives and intrinsic with "true motivations—patterns inherent in the lifestyle of the individual.*

What's an Incentive?

Incentives can be defined as external factors in achievement. They're not associated with other motivations, such as pride in achievement, or actions that intend to show compliance to the wishes of others or seek approval for the self.

The independent nature of an incentive is important. Unlike internal states of motivation, which sometimes border

Gerald T. Kowitz: Professor, College of Education, University of Oklahoma—Norman. Received for publication: January, 1976.

on the mysterious and incomprehensible, incentives are directly manipulable and as such are among the basic determiners of program operations.

Participants' Characteristics

At least as important and perhaps more important to the form and success of a program are the participants. They're reactors, not simple responders. They'll react differently to the design of the program in terms of their personal values, and in terms of the stage of their personal development. Program directors should expect different responses to a specific incentive, whether it's offered to an adult, a teenager, or a child.

The general background of the person, whether classified as advantaged or disadvantaged, will produce different responses to a set of incentives. Generalized gender roles—the female, the male, and the bisexual and the degree to which the roles have been integrated into the personality—can produce different reactions to incentives.

The patterns of reaction are quite sensitive to the age of a person. Young children appear to have a general drive towards competence. More often than not, this is a striving to achieve established, accepted standards. The standards are established externally, often by the expectations of adults, and become incentives.

Rarely will the behavior of a young child involve competing with others. However, it may have some elements of competition with the person's own past performance. By middle childhood, a distinct shift appears. Social comparisons become important and motivation toward achievement, specifically toward success, is readily observed. Competition among individuals can become intense; intense feelings are always dangerous. Quite often the intense competition between persons will generate achievements beyond the usual standards of performance.

Two Directions of Competition

Competition becomes a highly social activity and will generally be resolved in one of two directions. The two directions emerge in early adolescence and as youths approach maturity, they'll become relatively permanent personality traits. The one direction is a drive to succeed. The definition of success may vary greatly, but the direction is clearly obvious. Among boys, it's usually toward the achievement of a specific goal; among girls, it's commonly toward acceptance by the group or affiliation with the group. These distinctions may dissolve with the present questioning and revaluing of generalized gender roles.

Not as clearly related to gender, but commonly observable is the second direction—the drive to avoid failure. This may be the most difficult problem that a youth leader faces.

Youths who lack hope, who don't perceive themselves as having power over their environment, at least not enough to cause change, will commonly lack responsiveness to any incentive program. Another extreme reaction is for the youth to take a firm position against any program that involves incentives. Youths who don't value the incentives offered by the program appear to be apathetic, listless, or perhaps flighty. They seem to have no goals, to be unable to identify with the program. They may be obviously inconsistent in their verbalization of interest or goals or they may be consistent, but strongly dissenting. They may be definitely against any positive suggestions that are made to them.

Range of Reactions

The range of reactions to an incentive program poses many problems, but it also generates predictable patterns of behavior. Adolescents with a strong drive to succeed will normally select programs of actions spontaneously. In keeping with their developed interests and value systems, these people will persist in a task of their own choosing and move with their drive toward success. Sensing power, they'll continue to develop abilities and skills through which they can manipulate the environment. They show evidence of generating and enjoying the exercise of power over their environment.

As a general rule, the young people with a drive to succeed will select tasks in the middle range of difficulty. They'll seek activities that will permit, if not cause, some struggle and striving; some stress is enjoyable. The activities selected will be those in which they have a reasonable chance to succeed.

In contrast, those with a marked drive to avoid failure will elect not to participate at all. If a choice is forced on them, they'll elect either to participate in extremely difficult tasks, or in very easy tasks. In the former, the task is perceived as so difficult that the person can't be blamed or faulted for failure. In the latter, success is almost inevitable, but will bring little satisfaction other than the relief of being allowed to discontinue the activity.

In view of these general reactions, it's likely that for people who are strongly oriented toward success, the application of attractive incentives may be counterproductive. Some people may be lured to programs other than those that they'd value personally. Although they may work hard, they won't invest in an attractive program—as heavily as they would in programs of their own choosing. They'll appear to lack interest or concentration. On the other hand, the people whose basic drives are to avoid failure are likely to invest only in the incentives. They're easily lured into alternative pathways through incentive programs that propose unrealistic concepts of success. Both groups experience disappointment

when they've achieved the promised awards. Their feelings will commonly be verbalized as disillusionment or dissatisfaction. Both will be perceived as the fault of the program and its leaders.

Value Clarification

Regardless of the basic orientation, the role of personal values is a major determiner in the reaction of a person who tries to provide another with incentives for a particular style of behavior. Value clarification and affirmation are among the most widely discussed topics among professional workers concerned with the human estate.

Primitive values are formed early in life, but remain as the foundation of other value developments throughout a person's life. Many of these basic values are formed on a preverbal level and therefore aren't available for manipulation. Early values are verbalized as dichotomies: good or bad, pleasant or painful, right or wrong. At this level, values are neither systematic nor rational.

The second stage of value behavior emerges around the identification of authority. A parent figure, usually the mother, will be the child's first recognized authority. If a person learns that authority is firm, rigid, and unyielding, he may become submissive to authority or a seeker of authority and authoritarian positions. Either way, authority will become a central theme in his life. He may perceive it as a dangerous element; he may try to avoid it or to destroy it. He may perceive authority as the primary orientation of human life and seek to acquire it.

Finally, a person will begin to develop values dependent on information acquired from authority. If a person has learned that authority isn't to be questioned, he won't question it. If, on the other hand, a person has learned that authority is hesitant, harsh, or undependable, an attack on it may be required. A person can be forced into the uncomfortable position of being unable to accept what appears to be an excellent idea simply because it was initially presented by an authority figure. Another person may accept an obviously unreasonable idea because an authority figure espoused it.

Personal value development is a major factor in the significance of motivational schemes—particularly, external incentives and awards in programs designed to assist in the development of youth.

Process of Valuing

If a person doesn't value an incentive or motivational plan, it can't influence his behavior. The process of valuing has been categorized into a series of distinct processes.² Basic to all of them is that the individual must be free to choose and must choose freely. If there's coercion, if there's

no real choice, no personal values can be involved. A choice that's made under pressure will be changed quickly when the pressure is removed. For there to be free choices, there must be more than one alternative. Without alternatives, there can be no choice; without choice, there can be no value.

Choices that are made on impulse, without thought, won't lead to values of significance for a person's life. Reviewing the possible sequences and the ultimate consequences of a choice are obviously conscious, cognitive processes. The more information that a person has and the more strategies available for exploring choices, the more likely a person will make a wise choice and one that will be followed with some consistency in future behavior.

A major key in the process of developing values is value affirmation. When a valued choice has been made, a person will affirm it publicly. If a person isn't pleased, unclear, or even ashamed of the choice, if it hasn't resulted from a carefully made decision, the result will be hesitancy to proclaim the position and failure to act on the decision.

A value doesn't emerge from a single decision. It's a matter of learning, repetition, and reinforcement. When a generalized pattern has been learned, a person is said to have acquired a value. The value will be a significant part of the person's lifestyle. Thus, while valuing is basically an affective process, the development of a system of values requires a number of conscious and logical choices.

As a lifestyle emerges, it begins to feed on itself. Each person attributes the sources of success or failure to particular forces.

Value Attribution

All people develop a sense of attribution; they'll form a theory of cause and effect for their personal lives. Attribution is a conscious and cognitive theory of personal motivation³ which explains how things do and should happen in the world. Four distinct elements can be identified in a personal theory of attribution.

Perception of Ability

Primary to a personal theory of attribution is the person's perception of his own level of ability. An individual may perceive himself as a highly competent person, one who can succeed through his own efforts, or as one who's not able to cope with the world about him.

Self-concept of Ability

Self-concept of ability will determine the amount of effort to be invested willingly in any activity. The investment will relate back to the person's perception of probability of success. If the basic motive is a drive to succeed, a person will invest more than if the drive is primarily to avoid failure. Again a person won't invest as much in performance if the

basic motive is to be accepted or to be allowed to affiliate with a group.

Control Over Environment

A third point that will determine a value position is the person's perception of control over the environment. This is the idea of luck versus skill. If luck is seen as the major determiner of success, the person need not invest much personal effort; personal investment would be futile. On the other hand, if skill is a major factor in controlling or manipulating the environment, a person will invest himself heavily in the activity.

Task Difficulty Estimate

A final decision point is the personal concept of the difficulty of the task. Every personal theory of attribution depends on a process for estimating task difficulty. If the estimate is inaccurate, investment in the task won't be appropriate. Often a person will overreact and create a problem from a situation that could have been managed easily. Equally common is marked failure because a person underestimated the difficulty. Task assessment isn't easily learned, but is fundamental to every theory of personal attribution. A person's basic pattern of motivation will determine the accuracy of the estimates of task difficulty and of personal ability on which commitment to the task will be based. A person with a high drive to succeed won't invest in activities that are too difficult or too easy.

Incentive Programs

The use of incentives, external reasons to engage in an activity, is a common practice from the beginning of organized programs to the development of a positive lifestyle. A positive lifestyle may be defined through four criteria.

First, the individual must acquire a positive attitude toward efficient and constructive production. To be inefficient, to be marginally productive, is to be a failure as a mature human being. Every theory of personality includes the contribution of productive work to the fulfillment of human life. This isn't a restatement of the traditional work ethic. It's not based on blind acceptance of a position, but on a carefully examined set of personal values.

Second, a program must generate positive attitudes toward the rational regulation of human behavior. This includes attitudes towards authority that a person recognizes, but doesn't see as either immutable or dangerous.

Third, and perhaps the most difficult to achieve, is a positive attitude towards pleasure and satisfaction. For many people, anything that's pleasant or satisfying is something to feel guilty about. Some people find pleasure and satisfaction only in their own suffering or in the suffering of others. There are of course differences between adult pleasures, the pleasures

of childhood, and the pleasures of youth. An organized program must orient activities toward the pleasures appropriate for the stage of development and to the standards for pleasure of the current youth group.

A common example of people who can't accept pleasure is seen in the patterns of giving and receiving gifts. Some can't accept a gift without giving one in return, preferably one with greater value. Instead of providing them with pleasure, the gift gives them a debt that must be paid. They give gifts by the calendar, not because gifts provide pleasure for both the giver and the receiver.

Fourth, a planned program must operate to develop a positive attitude toward responsiveness and responsibility. No program for human development wants its participants to function on the basis of guilt, shame, or anxiety. Rather, a development program is oriented by a positive attitude to achieve specific goals and identifiable goods. Note that in this frame of reference, responsibility is based on pleasure and satisfaction. It's not an onerous duty.

Failure of a program to orient itself toward these four values may place it in a position where it will generate negative motivation—a desire to avoid or discontinue. It produces a clawing anxiety over even participating in the program. Perhaps the most unfortunate consequence arises from a fear of failure. A person may move into a position of viewing all human life as a zero-sum game.⁴ Personal success is equated with the ability to make other people fail or at least to make them appear inept. Fear can result in the generation of repetitive, nonproductive discussions and arguments over stable points on which there's basic agreement, but much quibbling over a few words. It can lead to a situation where significant decisions are made not on the job itself, but on incentives such as salary schedules, vacations, medical benefits, tenure, and retirement. One can speculate on the leadership that will be provided for a program where leaders are recruited on the basis of irrelevant incentives rather than on the nature of the job.

Summary

Incentives, external but attractive elements, aren't to be viewed as the goals of a program or even as necessary elements. They're only tools for achieving specific ends. They can't be evaluated except in the way they're used. Like other tools, they can be used skillfully or clumsily; they can be misused or even used as dangerous weapons. However, when used wisely and skillfully, they can be a major force in developing a positive lifestyle. A planned program that focuses on the development of such personal value systems among youth is a major asset for any social group.

Footnotes

1. Martin L. Maehr and Douglas D. Sjorgren, "Atkinson's Theory of Achievement Motivation: First Step Toward a Theory of Academic Motivation," *Review of Educational Research*, XLI (No. 2, 1971), 143-61.
2. Louis Raths, Merrill Harmin, and Sidney Simon, *Values in Teaching* (Columbus, Ohio: Merrill, 1961).
3. Edward E. Jones et al., *Attribution: Perceiving the Causes of Behavior* (Morristown, N.J.: General Learning Press, 1972).
4. Gerald T. Kowitz and Norma G. Kowitz, *An Introduction to School Guidance* (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1971).