



Read2lead

On the Folly of Rewarding A While Hoping for B

by Steven Kerr

Article Summary:

The article "[On the Folly of Rewarding A, While Hoping for B](#)" by Steven Kerr is a classic in the realm of business, management, and leadership.

At its core, the article is about motivation and the use of rewards to incentivize or shape people's behavior. Stated simply – people focus on what is rewarded (read more about expectancy theory of motivation [here](#)). The author's primary point is that rewards must be aligned with organizational goals / desired behaviors; if they're not, the desired outcomes are not likely to manifest (in fact, the opposite may occur).

Kerr provides several examples of misaligned incentives to highlight his point. One example is within the context of war. In war, the goal of the larger organization is to defeat the enemy – to win. However, the goal of the soldier is to get home safely. These two goals might seem incongruent, but Kerr argues the reward system is what is key to shaping soldier behavior to align with the goals of the larger organization. He uses WWII and Vietnam as examples. During WWII, soldiers were allowed to go home only when the war was won/over. Following orders helped win the war and allowed soldiers to return home. The incentive to follow orders was aligned with the soldiers' goals. Contrast that with the Vietnam war. The larger organization still wanted to win the war and the soldiers still wanted to get home safely, but the incentives structure changed. Instead of being forced to wait until the war was won, soldiers were allowed to go home when their tour ended. Mutineers were thought of as over-fatigued and often sent home, which made killing a commanding officer much more rewarding than listening to one!

A second example that may appeal to those in a military audience focuses on teamwork. Most coaches discourage a focus on individual accomplishments, preferring to speak of teamwork. Usually, however, rewards are distributed according to individual performance. The college basketball player who feeds his teammates instead of shooting will not compile impressive scoring statistics and is less likely to be drafted. The baseball player who hits to right field to advance the runners will win neither the batting nor home run titles and will be offered smaller raises. Therefore, it is rational for players to think of themselves first, and the team second.

Kerr does more than provide examples of "fouled" reward systems. He also identifies four root causes: 1) Fascination with an "objective" criterion; 2) Overemphasis on highly visible behaviors; 3) Hypocrisy; and 4) Emphasis on morality or equity rather than efficiency.

He ends his seminal piece with a brief discussion of some ways leaders might avoid the folly of misaligned goals and incentives to include: 1) Selection; 2) Training; and 3) Altering the Reward System.

What is Read2Lead?

Read2Lead is a tool to help leaders develop themselves and their teams. Read2Lead modules give junior officers a ready-to-use product that they can integrate into their leader professional development programs.

What's in this article-based Read2Lead module?

- A short summary of the [article](#)
- A series of questions that can be used to conduct a 60-minute LPD session
- Additional resources that may be helpful for the facilitator

What do I need to do to run an article-based Read2Lead program?

First, read the article and review this prep guide (to include the additional resources). You can easily prepare to run this LPD session in 60 – 90 min.

Second, schedule the LPD and issue clear instructions to attendees. Some things to consider. A) do you want to do this in person or virtually? B) do you want people to read the article in advance (recommended for a 60 min session, but if you have a 90-minute session planned, people could read the article on site); C) how you will arrange/set up your LPD space. Often, friends sit together. This can be detrimental to lively discussion. You might consider assigning small groups or pairing people up with specific partners.

Third, issue guidance and get the LPD on the training calendar. Clearly communicate the message that this is a planned event and warrants the attendees' full attention.

Fourth, rehearse. While this guide is intended to make the process easy, it is always a 'best practice' to rehearse your LPD rather than just walking in and winging it. Your prep will pay dividends in multiple ways.

Finally, execute the plan outlined below!

Note- you might also consider an AAR after the event. If you have any lessons learned or suggestions for improving this guide, let us know at CJO@westpoint.edu !

LPD Session Guide

The following guide is designed to run a 60-minute LPD session. For a 60-minute session, we highly recommend you have people read the article before the start of the LPD.

The following questions and some of the suggested talking points are simply recommendations. We encourage you to modify them based on your/your unit's goals and situation.

1. (10 min) The definition of leadership according to ADP 6-22 is to provide purpose, direction, and motivation. But what is motivation? Tell me what you know about motivation.

Here you might hear a lot of input on different theories of motivation. Some things you might mention if they don't come up.

[McClelland's Human Motivation Theory](#) states that there are three types of motivation. 1) Need for Achievement; 2) Need for Power; 3) Need for Affiliation. Here you might talk about these different types of needs. How do these types of motivational needs impact the types of projects and tasks assigned to individuals? How do you find out and implement taskings based on these kinds of motivations?

You might also mention [equity theory](#) or [expectancy theory](#) – or bring up the terms and ask those in attendance to use their phones to provide an overview.

2. (10 min) When it comes to motivating personnel, ultimately, there are internal and external motivators. Is there anything wrong with using external rewards like these to shape behavior? Is the Army (are we) wrong to rely on these things?

You might spend a few minutes talking about extrinsic vs. intrinsic motivation. Some may say you want to strive to foster intrinsic motivation, but is there anything wrong with extrinsic motivators?

3. (5 min) What "rewards" does the Army use to incentivize or shape behavior?

There are many external: positive counseling, COAs, coins, passes, medals, promotions, preferred assignments/missions. Perhaps even the absence of punishment might be seen as a reward.

4. (15-20 min) Can anyone provide some examples where you think our unit (or a unit you served in previously) may be rewarding 'A' while hoping for 'B.'

This is where you might offer some examples if the audience doesn't provide them.

*What about this – have you ever tasked one of your subordinates to do something. He quickly responds with a sub-par product with multiple errors. You're frustrated, but you know that you can fix the errors about 10 times more quickly than he can. So, you tell him that it's not sufficient, but then you go ahead and fix the product yourself—leaving him with no more tasks to complete that day. What have you done? In addition to missing a training opportunity, **you've informally rewarded your direct report for sub-par effort.** By not having him go through the pain of fixing the problem, he now knows that he can get by with little effort. That leaves you at the office at 7 p.m., while he's already home or at happy hour. Did you mean to reward poor performance? Of course not. **But in a way, you did.***

Does the Army say they want innovative or creative solutions and individuals but promote/reward/publicly recognize staff who parrot the Commander's thoughts back to him or her? Are we really rewarding conformity and compliance?

Do we accept failure / foster a learning mindset? We say, "winning matters", but if we're trying to encourage innovation, is every innovative approach going to result in a "win?"

What about our talent management? Do some organizations say they want loyal, humble, people-oriented leaders, but hire people who have chased high visibility jobs/positions, leaving past units or people without regard for anything other than their own career progression? There might be a link here with the toxic/counterproductive leadership problem the Army has wrestled with perhaps?

5. (15-20 min) Now let's think about some desired behavior we want in our Army (or our unit). How can we develop a reward system that promotes these behaviors? In other words, how can we AVOID the folly of rewarding A while hoping for B. How can we do things right?

You might have folks break into groups and develop a plan during this phase. ID the behavior(s) and the steps to encourage those behaviors. Have them briefly present their plan – and encourage the other groups to provide feedback.

Additional Resources

- [Podcast](#) on the Kerr article and a [rebuttal article](#) (On the WISDOM of rewarding A while hoping for B). You might consider assigning some people the rebuttal article, but it can be dense. As the facilitator, you might skim the article and listen to the podcast and play devil's advocate if it seems like everyone is simply agreeing/there isn't deep enough conversation

- A [link to a video lecture](#) from a University of Michigan professor discussing the article in the context of inspiring and motivating individuals

This Read2Lead module was produced by LTC(P) Jordon Swain and SSG Shallen Hadwiger