

Rewarding Uniformity

by Kenneth A. Bisson

“**B**ecause we had a 100 percent sign-up for fluoride treatments, we are going to make and share a pizza.” I was dismayed to read that statement in my son’s weekly parents letter from his third grade teacher. A push toward conformity had tested the integrity of a class of third graders.

What will a child do when facing a system designed to reward uniformity? Let’s consider this question using the relatively innocuous case of offering a pizza lunch for 100 per cent sign-up for school fluoride. There will be two perspectives from which a student can consider a teacher’s reward. Both perspectives provide a dismal view of rewarding uniformity.

We begin by assessing the effect of the school fluoride on each student’s dental health. A decision to participate should depend on each student’s unique circumstances regarding the fluoride content of his water, his toothpaste, and his preference for receiving any needed supplements from the family dentist or from the school.

As a family physician I guide parents making fluoride choices. In the well water across our county, natural levels of fluoride range from far below to far above the standard city water’s controlled level of one part per million. I see children with fluorosis from excessive fluoride and children with caries which might have been avoided by increased fluoride use.

Thus, depending on his non-school fluoride

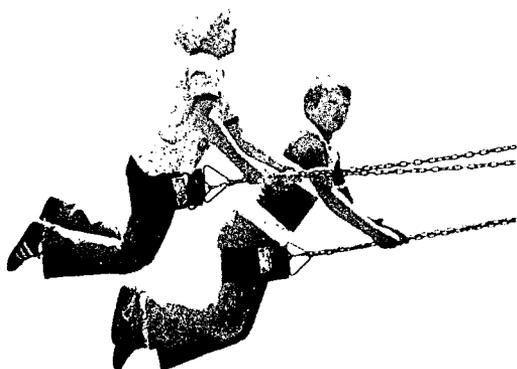
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use, a student may view the school’s program from one of two perspectives: 1) I will benefit from participating in the school fluoride program, or 2) I will not benefit from participating in the school program. Even at this level of analysis the decision to reward 100 per cent participation begins to look questionable. A closer inspection of the effects on the individuals in either camp should lead to the rejection of reward systems that require uniformity.

First consider the student who wants to participate and will benefit from additional fluoride treatments. His opportunity to receive pizza may be denied by the failure of another student to select the alternative preferred by the teacher. Will he feel motivated to urge classmates to select the preferred choice? What message is being given about individuals’ thinking for themselves? Are these students being asked to “help” others to make the “right” choice? I believe this is unfortunately the case.

Although they may not be consciously aware of it, these students will be influenced by the many implications of this situation. The teacher’s push toward conformity glorifies peer pressure. This is the same peer pressure we often ask our children to resist by urging them to “think for themselves.”

Now let’s consider the student risking harm from additional fluoride. For this student, a choice *not* to participate will preserve his teeth. Making that choice requires him to be true to himself. He thus demonstrates confidence in



his ability to pursue his own values. By honestly doing so he maintains his integrity. Although his relationship with his teacher and classmates may unfortunately suffer, his self-esteem is not diminished by that choice.

Suppose however that this student fails to pursue his own values and instead sacrifices them in order to select the choice preferred by his teacher. Here the reward system is revealed to be a source of true misery. Of course, now everyone will get to enjoy a pizza lunch. But in abandoning his own values, this student is passing a judgment on himself that, after many repetitions, will cost him much more than unattractive teeth. When a child surrenders to pressure and denies the importance of his own values, he also surrenders his self-esteem.

Self-esteem is the reputation we acquire with ourselves. I believe that a primary challenge for parents and teachers, in working with children, is to enhance self-esteem. As a parent, I consider the encouragement of each of my children's self-esteem to be as important as providing food, clothing, and shelter. A high self-

esteem is a major requirement of a fulfilling life. An individual with low self-esteem, by definition, will feel inadequate and unworthy of a happy, successful life. Such an individual will make choices that bring about a life that's as miserable as he believes he deserves.

I hope every parent and teacher will consider enhancing a child's self-esteem when choosing reward systems. Providing motivation in appropriate ways is not an easy task. As parents and teachers we must administer our power as an authority figure carefully, with deliberate forethought. Rather than reward uniformity, we can seize opportunities to celebrate individuality.

My focus on the individual in the above discussion does not imply that I undervalue the magnificent benefits of teamwork and group activities. Indeed, the best of achievements result from individuals working together! But it is *because* of individual differences that groups of individuals with differing strengths can produce more than can a group of clones. Imagine basketball teams comprised of all centers or all guards. Their performance would be reduced because of their uniformity. They would be as ineffective as would be a school full of only math teachers. Uniformity is a detriment to successful teamwork.

In conclusion, a reward system based on uniformity is unwise. Because of our valuable individual differences, it is uncommon for a single choice to be right for each of us. Even in that case where all individuals may actually benefit from selecting the same action, requiring uniformity denies the reward to all whenever one classmate chooses poorly. Usually such a reward system becomes an unreasonable test of integrity for the individuals who ought to make the unrewarded choice. Rewarding uniformity tempts these students to trade their self-esteem for the approval of their peers and teacher.

Encouraging individuals to be responsible for themselves results in a society of better individuals. Such individuals confidently exercise their decision-making capacity rather than defer to others. We can reward uniformity or we can encourage self-responsibility, competence, confidence, and integrity. The better choice is obvious. □

“Blat”: Corruption in Eastern Europe

by Michael Brewer

When I first arrived in Yugoslavia as an exchange student, I knew three things: It was socialist, it was in Eastern Europe, and I would spend a year there. I also knew three words: *hvala*, *dovidjenja*, and *pivo*—“thank you,” “good-bye,” and “beer.” I remember proudly pronouncing my first word in the language, *PECTOPAH*, only to find that it was in the Cyrillic alphabet and actually read “restoran,” meaning “restaurant.” Though I now blush at the thought of my naïvete, during my year-long stay in Yugoslavia I came to know the workings of a system misunderstood by most foreigners.

Ironically, one needs to know little Marxist-Leninist dogma to understand Eastern European economies. By contrast, most any capitalist is probably better suited to understand them . . . with the addition of two words—*blat* and *nalevo*.

The most sought-after commodity in Eastern Europe is *blat*. And *blat* is not Russian for caviar, nor Latvian for sable. *Blat* is Russian slang, and loosely means “influence or connection.” The *blat* market is an underground where those with “connections” barter with others *ty mnye, ya tebye*, “you scratch my back and I’ll scratch yours.” It involves no money, only goods and favors.

Working *nalevo*, on the contrary, is often a substantial source of income for Soviet families. Soviets call it “creeping capitalism,” and it literally means “on the left,” but it translates more like, “on the side” or “under the table.” In the Soviet Union, an additional income is

vital to everyday existence. In Odessa, dubiously known as the “Chicago” of the USSR, there is a saying, “If you want revenge on a man, let him live on his salary.” It’s a terrible fate. No one can imagine it.¹

The magnitude of *blat* and *nalevo* is not easily understood. They constitute much more than just a “black market,” where denim-clad Soviet youth accost foreigners with offers of rubles for Levi’s or thin western ties. “*Blat* is an essential lubricant of life.”² Communism seeks utopia, and *blat* serves as the cushion between reality and ideology.

My host-father, a burly Slav with more than a hint of Gypsy blood and Gypsy guile, had an unusually ambiguous job title by Western standards.

“He is a *Direktor*,” my host-brother would tell me. Nothing could have been more vague. In Yugoslavia, *Direktor* is a title held by nearly everyone given a desk and a telephone.

He often took me to “work” with him. But we wouldn’t go to his office. Instead, we frequented working-class taverns owned by friends of his. We would then sit at a smokey table with Gypsies—men with converging eyebrows and missing teeth—or those with briefcases and peppered gray hair, drink beer or *shlivovitz*, and listen to the loud folk music the band played. Through the din, my host-father would talk, argue, and smoke a lot of cigarettes. This always went on late into the night as we moved from restaurant to restaurant, and often became more like an unruly drinking bout as the night wore on.

These same restaurant owners, accordion players, circus owners, and other such folk often visited our house when my host-father failed to make his rounds. These visits were almost exclusively nocturnal, but because my host-brother and I slept in the nearest room, the conversations were always too loud to disregard.

One night an old salt with a wooden leg stopped in. He had a nasty habit of fiercely rapping his rings on the table when making a point. My host-mother was a strong woman, in mind as well as muscle, and any other man would have been quickly ushered out, but she did nothing. He brought with him a large sack filled with coffee and chocolate, both unattainable in Yugoslavia at that time, as well as sev-

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