

Motivation: Intrinsic or Extrinsic?

Written by Richard Ferguson, Ph.D.

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Most runners like to get awards at races, especially when they have run well. Even though the medals may be small and the people on the trophies made of plastic, awards are a representation of accomplishment. But what effect do awards really have on human motivation? Logically, it would make sense that an award at the end of the race would increase motivation, but what does research really say about awards and motivation?

Seems like most people like to get "stuff". Free samples at the food store, raffle prizes and yes awards at races. There are overall awards and age group awards at most races. Personally, I still like awards, even after 47 years of running, and I would hate to see them go away. It's hard to imagine running races without awards, but from a pure motivation standpoint, lets drill down a little deeper on the subject.

Much of the research would suggest that giving extrinsic rewards, like trophies, merchandise etc., will decrease intrinsic motivation to perform an activity. Seems as if you start giving people extrinsic rewards they give up on an activity quicker, loose interest and actually perform worse. It is especially true when extrinsic rewards begin to be given for activities that were already intrinsically rewarding. Those extrinsic rewards may undermine intrinsic motivation.

Early on in an activity extrinsic rewards can increase motivation, but over time the extrinsic rewards may not be enough to keep people motivated. So early in a running career those medals and trophies may seems really great, but over time they may loose their appeal. There needs to be something deeper involved to keep people running. In some cases runners may actually become dependent on the rewards, which may lower their pure love of running.

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Children and beginning runners seem to be especially prone to the undermining of intrinsic motivation through extrinsic rewards, like medals and trophies. Psychology would tell us that giving everyone a reward for participation is good to develop interest in an activity, but these rewards should be gradually withdrawn. When young runners are first starting in the sport, the lure of a trophy can be a very powerful incentive. But if the trophy remains the sole reason for running, then motivation may decrease when there are no trophies at the end of the race. Too many rewards may communicate that running is not worth doing on for its own sake.

On the other hand, there is evidence that extrinsic rewards can increase intrinsic motivation if the reward gives the runner information about their competence as a runner. In 1975 psychologist Edward Deci formulated Cognitive Evaluation Theory. He found that external rewards can indeed increase intrinsic motivation if the rewards give feedback on how competent or "good" someone is at an activity. But he also reported if humans feel they are being controlled by rewards, the rewards can lower intrinsic motivation. Humans don't like to feel controlled by dangling a carrot in front of them all the time! So those trophies and medals can indeed increase intrinsic motivation if they are viewed as a symbol of doing something really well, reaching a goal or having some competitive success.

So what can be gleaned from this? Should awards be eliminated at races? Certainly not!!! Awards can be tokens of achievement. They can bring back memories for many years to come. But awards just can't be the sole motivation for running. If running is a lifetime activity there must be a pure intrinsic love for running itself. You probably run because you like to run, so that means you're intrinsically motivated to run.

To get youngsters and new runners involved in the sport, extrinsic rewards can be a strong tool to help them develop an interest. But always stress to new runners the positive, intrinsic aspects of running. Running for the sheer enjoyment of it, being outdoors, friendships developed, stress reduction or just because it makes you feel good will increase the chances of running being a positive, lifelong activity.

After a well run race it is very nice to get a trophy or medal. The award is recognition of success after many miles of training and a race well run. It can be a lasting memento of a proud moment in your long running career. Yea, I think I can say runners like awards and the awards do indeed represent their competence as runners. Even very small awards can have a huge meaning. Maybe it was the first medal or trophy you ever won or medal from your first marathon. Special awards can have special meaning and that can enhance motivation in the future.

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Missing out on an award can also increase motivation to train harder and be more focused in preparation. However, consider if awards were eliminated and never given again in any race. Would you still keep running and keep racing? The great majority of us would because of our pure intrinsic motivation to run. So keep loving that four mile loop, that special trail, that anticipation of your next marathon or even the anticipation of your run tomorrow. You love to run and a medal might just be good for you from time to time.

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