

Carrot Pro's and Con's a reflection on the use of incentives in youth programs

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Let me ask you a question. Are knives good or bad? The answer, of course, is; it depends. Cut me a slice of bread, and knives are good. Cut my throat ... not so good. This is my attitude toward the use of incentives in youth programs. Whether they are helpful or harmful depends a great deal on why and how they are being used. Yet in my experience, youth programs are often unaware of the fact that incentives have the potential for harm and, therefore, incentives are sometimes implemented with insufficient thought given to the impact they may have. Programs should always be aware that incentives, when used inappropriately, can go well beyond benign ineffectiveness and enter into the realm of doing harm. Before implementing incentives in your program, you may wish to consider the following potential pitfalls.

Pitfall #1: Incentives may treat the symptom rather than the disease.

Usually when incentives are being discussed it is because young people are not doing something we want them to do. They are not showing up, or they are not participating adequately from our perspective, or they are not accomplishing the goals we wish them to accomplish. So we seek to encourage their efforts by offering monetary rewards, goods, or services. While this often alleviates to some degree the issues of lack of attendance, participation, or accomplishment, it doesn't address in any way the problem(s) responsible for these issues.

Basic Youth Development practice asserts that young people can and will be involved, participatory, and accomplished if they are given legitimate and relevant opportunities. If you accept this assertion (as I do), then where issues with attendance, participation, or accomplishment exist, the *problem* is a lack of legitimacy or relevance with the opportunity. Offering incentives does not address this problem. Instead, when incentives work, they allow us to avoid addressing the problem by substituting entitlement for legitimacy or relevance. While this may solve the *issue*, it doesn't solve the *problem*, and it relieves us of the responsibility for designing opportunities that are legitimate and relevant to a young person's needs. We may see an increase in attendance, participation, or accomplishment, but are we really doing a service for the young person? Do the increases that we see really mean anything to the young person's life?

I once interviewed a young woman who explained to me in very precise detail the *minimum* efforts she needed to make in order to collect the equivalent of \$350.00 per month from various youth program incentives. This was the extent of the benefit of these various involvements, from her perspective. If the goal of these programs is to ensure that this young woman has access to \$350.00 per month, and knows what hoops she needs to jump through to collect it, then these incentive programs are working well. I suspect, however, that the programs have different goals in mind, in which case the incentives may be more problematic than they are productive.

Using incentives to substitute for the challenging work of addressing a program's legitimacy and relevance to the young people it serves is a lazy way of providing service, and can end up being more of a disservice than anything else.

Pitfall #2: Incentives may act as a form of exploitation.

The main focus of my work is with street-dependent youth. Many of these youth fall prey to adults through prostitution and other forms of exploitation. While no population of young people should ever be exploited by adults, this population is particularly impacted by exploitation, requiring programs and care givers who accept the responsibility for interacting with them to be vigilant against any activities that may be exploitive.

Let me put forth a premise, as my position on this is grounded in this premise. A program that doesn't teach young people new skills and new coping mechanisms fails the young people it serves by

reinforcing street-developed concepts rather than teaching new ones. This is my problem with programs that are based on removing choice and control from young people, despite any short-term results they may achieve. Mandate a young person to a staff-controlled environment where they are told what to do and when to do it, and you will probably see accomplishment and progress, at least while the young person is in the program. Such programs, however, have notoriously high recidivism rates, and most street outreach programs can talk about the successful graduates from mandated, structured programs who end up back on the streets after their successful 'graduation.' Why? Because the program is doing the same thing the pimp is doing -- taking control of the young person's life and making their choices and decisions for them. It works for the pimp, and it works for the program, at least in terms of getting the young person's compliance with what you want them to do. The difference, of course, is that the pimp wants compliance with negative behaviors and the program wants compliance with positive behaviors, but the lesson learned by the young person in both cases is that someone else is responsible for their choices and decisions, and when the structure is removed (they graduate) all they know is how to do is what someone tells them to do -- so they gravitate towards that same dynamic, which usually means a return to the streets.

But is it really fair to compare incentives to exploitation? Yes, if exploitation is the basis of the exchange. When we speak of exploitation, we are talking about a situation where a young person is facing a choice that serves needs other than theirs. On the streets this usually takes the form of some kind of transaction. In order to meet an adult's need for power, sex, or opportunity, something the young person desires is offered, such as money, shelter, or relative safety. This is how the street economy operates. I give you my body (service, sex, whatever), and you give me my survival (money, food, shelter, protection). Street-dependent youth understand and accept this basis of exchange. They are comfortable with it -- but it is not a good deal for them. It is exploitation, and they need to learn how to survive differently and be given opportunities to do so.

Now, let's look at the basis of many youth program incentives. We have a need (meeting contract or self-imposed goals for attendance, participation, or accomplishment) and we offer money, goods, or services to meet these needs. The young people offer their body (by showing up, participating, and/or meeting goals), and we, in exchange, offer them survival (by providing the incentive). What is the difference between this exchange and those that they engage in on the streets? It is the same as the difference between a pimp and a mandated program -- one exploits for negative motivation and one exploits for positive motivation. But the principle involved is the same and we end up perpetuating negative concepts and behaviors rather than changing them. Look at any youth service system that has a high reliance on incentives, and I guarantee you that staff will be complaining about the attitude of entitlement that the young people exhibit. But this attitude of entitlement is not due to something 'wrong' with *them*; it is a result of *us* relying on exploitive manipulations to meet our program's needs. Incentive programs run the risk of creating the very attitudes and behaviors that we claim to dislike. In a very real sense, we get what we pay for. But far worse is the danger that we reinforce beliefs and behaviors that need to be challenged for a young person to successfully exit street life.

Pitfall #3: Incentives may reinforce negative beliefs about young people.

Much of my point here is an extension of what has already been said above, but as our beliefs about the young people we serve have a direct impact on our success with them, this point deserves its own attention. I've already talked about how incentives may breed entitlement and we can end up blaming the young person for an attitude and behavior that we've perpetuated. But an even greater danger lies in the beliefs that may be created when incentives don't work. And, contrary to conventional wisdom, they often don't.

There are two major ways that incentives can fail. Either they don't resolve the issue (e.g., they don't increase attendance, participation, or accomplishment) or they resolve the issue unsatisfactorily (e.g., attendance is sporadic, participation is limited, or accomplishments are half-hearted). In both cases the problem is one of a basic cost/benefit analysis on the part of the young person. Is the benefit (incentive) equal to or greater than the cost (what I have to give up or do to receive the incentive)? Note that nowhere in this equation is the legitimacy or relevance of the opportunity, we are simply competing with what it is worth to the young person to sell us their body instead of doing something else (hanging with their friends, engaging in street drama, earning money illegally). Since most programs have limited resources for incentives the question often becomes -- do I make a bunch of money selling drugs, prostituting, or stealing, or do I show up at this program thing for some second-hand clothes, a movie pass, or some McDonald's coupons? Hmmm, that's a tough choice. In fact, if

this is the quality of the incentives we have to offer, we rarely can compete with simply hanging with friends.

The bottom line is that most programs cannot afford to offer incentives that rise to the level where they can win in a cost/benefit analysis, which means that incentives often fail to result in satisfactory resolution of the attendance, participation, and accomplishment problems we are attempting to address. At the same time incentives may directly impact beliefs and behaviors that we don't like to see. The result is that we begin to blame the young people for their lack of commitment and enthusiasm, if not outright dislike them for their unpleasant attitudes. Once we arrive there, we're really not in a position to be much help at all.

Pitfall #4: Incentives may be insulting.

A young woman I knew was involved in a community committee looking at services for homeless youth. The adults involved, outside of the committee and without consulting her, decided that it was unfair that the adults were attending as part of their paid time while she was attending essentially as a volunteer. To correct this injustice they decided that she would be given \$20.00 every time she attended and, at the next meeting, she was informed of their decision. That was the last meeting she attended.

The fact is that it was important to her to be attending as a volunteer. She felt that the services had done so much for her that she wanted to give back. When she was told that she was, in effect, no longer a volunteer, she no longer had the reason she was attending.

This is a subtle form of insult; to make assumptions about the participant's motivations without their input and to reduce something that is priceless (a motivation to give back to your community) to something as valueless as 20 bucks. Now consider that 20 bucks is probably considerably more than most programs offer as an incentive and try to imagine the impact that has on the receiver. How much value am I going to place on my attendance, participation, or accomplishments if the value you place on them is a coupon for a Big Mac? Rather than a reward or compensation it can feel like an insult, and instead of gratitude we see resentment. This brings us back to Pitfall #3. Since we don't understand why our magnanimous efforts are being received with resentment, we conclude that we must be working with ungrateful little snots.

The good news about incentives.

This is not to say that incentives are all bad and never have a place in youth services. One of the best programs I know has incentives as a major component of its design. But I am trying to make the point that incentives can be a double-edged sword and that they can be as harmful as they can be helpful. Recognizing this means that programs have a responsibility to use incentives in a considered, careful manner, and to ensure that any incentive offered is based on the positive potential of incentives while avoiding the negative pitfalls described above.

A positive application of incentives assures that they are being used to *alleviate barriers* rather than *substitute* for legitimacy and relevance. Things like offering child care to support attendance, reimbursement for costs of transportation, or even services such as food or shelter to relieve a need to seek them elsewhere may be justifiable uses for incentives. The key is that the incentive is related to the *barrier* and in support of a young person's *desire* for the opportunity, rather than being tied to the *program's* needs or an attempt to *create* a desire for the opportunity. Instead of "*I will pay you for doing this for me*" the offer becomes "*If you wish to do this, I will compensate your costs.*"

In Conclusion

If you are thinking about incentives realize that you are playing with an idea that has potential for harm. Incentives can be very helpful if they are compensating for the cost of a young person's desire to do something, but very dangerous if they are being used to create the desire. Ensure that the incentive is a reasonable and justified compensation that removes a barrier preventing a young person from doing something that they wish to do and you have a positive incentive program. Use the incentive as a way of bribing the young person to do something that *you* want and the incentive program may end up creating more problems than it solves.