

Safety incentive programs have been a traditional part of many safety programs.

Do they really work or do they do more harm than good?

Does an incentive program actually change worker behavior and prevent accidents or does the apparent success of an incentive program reflect a reluctance on the part of the employees to report injuries?

Does an incentive program smack of "manipulation" and trivialize safety by turning it into a game or lottery?

If you have or are considering implementing a safety incentive program, you need to ask yourself the above questions.

The underlying argument for having an incentive program is that it will change the workers' behavior and get them to "act safely". The assumption is that employees have accidents because of their behavior and that they have personal control over their work practices and environment. While most accidents certainly involve some element of unsafe behavior on the part of the injured worker, the assumption that the worker could have prevented the accident is a dangerous one. There are almost always multiple causes of any accident and unsafe behavior or risk taking on the part of the injured worker is only one element.

Most safety incentive programs are based on a reduction or elimination of injuries or accidents. If you don't have an accident or your department or plant is accident free or reduces accidents by some percentage, you get a reward. The basic premise is flawed. How can the worker take the program seriously when he or she does not have the power to eliminate or control all of the potential causes of loss? In effect, the employees are punished by not getting their reward when an accident occurs over which they had only partial or no control. This leads to dissatisfaction, complaints that the program is unfair, and the safety committee spending too much of its time trying to improve or change the incentive program.

Even if you consider an accident in which the employee's unsafe behavior was the only cause, it is questionable whether the incentive program would have really changed the behavior. If employees won't wear safety glasses to prevent being blind for the rest of their life, do you really believe that the promise of a sweatshirt or \$50 at the end of the quarter will get them to wear their eye protection? Do you really believe that the promise of a prize at the end of three months or a year will actually change the day-to-day behavior of your employees every day throughout that entire waiting period?

Another argument for having an incentive program is that it increases safety awareness. While that may be true, there are much better ways to spend your money and increase awareness without trivializing safety by making it a game or contest. Frequent safety training sessions, consistent enforcement of safety rules and safe work practices by every supervisor, employee involvement in developing safety policies, highly visible safety audits with feedback on the results to all employees, and recognition for a safety suggestion are examples of other ways to promote safety awareness. It also sends a

message that you care and are serious about safety rather than trying to "buy" safety performance by putting the entire burden on the employees to "act safely".

If you want to set aside some money to promote safety in your facility, why not use the money for recognition awards instead of as an incentive that probably doesn't work anyway? There is a big difference between incentives and recognition. All of us want to be recognized for our accomplishments and to receive praise. In surveys, praise and recognition for a job well done always comes out ahead of salary or money on a list of what motivates employees. A small amount of money or an inexpensive gift used in conjunction with genuine praise and recognition will motivate an individual or group to try to do more of whatever got them that praise and recognition. The same small reward held out as an incentive to behave in a particular way is not as likely to work.

If you have a safety incentive program now, perhaps you can think of ways to change it to a recognition program and get more bang for your buck. If you don't have an incentive program, think carefully before implementing one. Will it really promote the behavior changes that you think it will?