



The Patrol Officer's Perspective on Rewards and Punishments

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Decades of extensive research in psychology has revealed that people respond to rewards and punishments in the workplace.¹ Law enforcement officers are no exception. We are generally motivated to engage in, or refrain from, specific behaviors because of the rewards and punishments associated with those behaviors.

Private industry often links pay and other rewards to specific employee performance goals. High performance often results in pay raises, swift promotions and bonuses. Failing to live up to the performance standards in the private sector often means that a potential year-end pay bonus is denied or that an under-performing employee will be included in the company's next round of reduction-in-force layoffs.

In the public sector, however, we usually do not think of using employee rewards. This is, at least in part, due to the nature of civil service rules that make using formal rewards difficult. Public sector employers generally cannot offer pay bonuses or an unscheduled promotion to reward excellent work.

Law enforcement agencies often focus on the use of employee punishments as a management tool rather than rewards—in the form of verbal reprimands, write-ups, suspensions or undesirable shift assignments.² **This is unfortunate, as research consistently reveals that a punitive workplace carries negative side effects (such as destroying the morale and organizational commitment of the entire workforce), while the proper use of rewards does not.**³

In order for rewards to motivate employees, however, the employees have to actually value the potential rewards—in other words, the “carrots” being offered must be enticing enough to actually affect behavior. If the employee does not place any value in it, the employee may not be motivated to achieve it. Conversely, in order for a punishment to discourage a bad behavior, the employee must be so concerned by the “sticks” that could be utilized that it actually impacts their behavior.

It is noteworthy that one recent study involving several hundred patrol officers from two dozen agencies revealed that as officers progress through their careers, their work performance is affected less by the fear of punishment and more by the intrinsic and extrinsic rewards that they see as desirable. Veteran officers appear to engage in high levels of productivity almost exclusively because they receive external rewards for doing so and / or they receive some form of internal satisfaction for doing so, according to this study.⁴

How are Rewards and Punishments Viewed?

It is crucial for law enforcement leaders to understand how patrol officers view specific rewards and punishments encountered within law enforcement organizations. One study explored how patrol officers perceived a set of potential workplace rewards and punishments.⁵ A sample of patrol officers from one suburban sheriff department in the Midwestern U.S. were asked to score the desirability of a set of potential rewards and punishments that are commonly utilized within law enforcement organizations. Given a list of 14 potential rewards and punishments, the patrol officers were asked to rank the desirability of each on a scale from 1 (*devastating to me*) to 10 (*extremely desirable to me*). The results were as follows:

Reward or Punishment	Average Score
Choice of shift assignment	7.98
Approval of time off request	7.72
Letter of commendation	7.38
High performance evaluation score	7.02
Opportunity for special training	6.98
Verbal compliment from supervisor	6.97
Assignment of special equipment (i.e., radar, specific car, patrol rifle, etc.)	6.95
Transfer to specialty job assignment (i.e., detective, PIO, etc.)	5.89
Promotion to supervisor rank	5.58
Verbal reprimand	5.23
Written reprimand	4.67
Low performance evaluation score	4.41
Suspension without pay	3.20
Termination of employment	1.41

The rank ordering of the deputies' responses reveal many things. First, the two rewards ranked highest – choice of shift and time off requests – both influence the officer's life outside of work, such as family commitments, hobbies, or outside employment. This may suggest officers value most the rewards that improve their quality of life outside of work. Second, **informal rewards that can more easily be granted by an immediate supervisor (such as time off requests, written or verbal compliment, and evaluation scores) tended to rank higher in value than rewards that require a more formal process or command level decisions (such as promotions, transfers, or specialty assignments).**

Third, **while law enforcement organizations emphasize annual performance evaluations as the primary measure of employee performance feedback, other forms of feedback (shift assignment, day off approvals, and letters of appreciation / commendation) appear to carry**

more weight and may occur more frequently than just annually. Fourth, it is interesting to note that the reward of promotion to supervisor ranked just above the punishment of a verbal reprimand, revealing that most of these patrol officers did not find promotion to sergeant particularly desirable.

When the responses of these patrol officers were examined by each officer's years of experience, the more experience the officers had, the more they valued shift assignment and time off requests, and the less they valued promotions or specialty assignments. The longer the tenure of the officers the more they feared terminations or suspensions, and the less they worried about reprimands or performance evaluation scores. This suggests that as patrol officers move closer to retirement the more they fear punishments that could influence their pensions, and the more they value rewards that improve their quality of life outside of work.

Conclusion

Psychological research suggests that employee performance can be improved through the skillful use of workplace rewards and (when necessary) punishments. This study suggests that rewards that most motivate the majority of patrol officers are things that allow them to enjoy their lives outside of work. A shift of their choosing, or at least a stable schedule, and the approval of requests for specific days off are rewards that might be linked to good performance. Written and verbal complements are also valuable to patrol officers, while high performance evaluation scores, specialty assignments, and promotions may be valuable to some individual officers, but not the majority. **Law enforcement leaders may be able to improve the efficiency of their teams by finding out what informal rewards best motivate each of their team members and adeptly using these rewards to motivate their teams to excellence.**

References

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