

What fruit baskets have to do with performance

Matthias Mölleny

We know from behavioural economics that positive, appreciative feedback is more effective than sanctions to achieve a sustainable change in behaviour. An experiment with motorists shows this impressively: A group of car drivers had the task of covering a certain distance as quickly as possible, but in compliance with the laws (maximum speed on this section 50 km/h). Immediately before starting off, they received the additional information that a radar measuring system ("lightning box") was installed about halfway along the route. Knowing that they would be punished if they did not keep to the prescribed speed limit has led everyone to adapt their behaviour accordingly and none of them triggered the flash. It was interesting, however, that the majority of motorists were travelling at a speed of between 51 and 54 km/h at the measuring point. They knew that they were within a tolerance range that did not lead to punishment. Exactly this tolerance range has been exploited and, strictly speaking, they have not adhered to the specified maximum speed.

A second group of car drivers was given the same task, but here no radar measuring system was used, but a so-called speed display, in which the current speed is shown to the car drivers on a digital display, together with a smiley in green, yellow and red, indicating whether the permitted maximum speed is just exceeded or undershot. The exciting question for behavioural economists was whether this speed display also has a behavioural effect on drivers, and if so, whether the effect is greater or smaller than with the version with the flash box.

The result of the experiment was clear and at first surprising. The use of the Tempodisplay has influenced the behaviour of drivers more effectively than the flash box, because practically all test participants have limited their speed at the measuring point to less than 50 km/h in order to receive the "reward" in the form of green smileys. What was also noticed was the different attitudes of the test participants. While an attempt is made to exploit the existing tolerance range ("extend the curve to the edge") if punishment is imminent and presumably perceived as unfair, expectably positive feedback leads to the specified limits being adhered to voluntarily and completely.

What can one learn from this experiment for everyday work? First of all, it is important to think about where we work with sanctions for possible misconduct in the various operational processes and where we use positive feedback to control behaviour. If threatened sanctions lead employees to focus more on how they can take advantage of a possible tolerance range than on actually meeting the targets, we need to think about which internal "lightning boxes" could be replaced by "speed displays".

It's about creating a climate of esteem. This includes, above all, appropriate behaviour on the part of superiors, who should not only take time once a year but much more frequently for appreciative feedback to their employees. A short, constructive feedback of one minute per week achieves more than the traditional one-hour annual meeting, in which everything there is to say is concentrated. It is not a matter of forced adulation, but of honest, authentic feedback that is presented in a respectful, supportive and constructive manner.

The respectful treatment of employees requires a framework that goes beyond the behaviour of superiors and reminds all those involved of the principle of appreciation. Just as tempo displays must be conspicuous to be effective, it must be visible in workflows that more attention is paid to valuing performance than to identifying and sanctioning possible misconduct.

How could such "Tempodisplays" look in concrete terms? Here is an incomplete list of suggestions:

- Free coffee and water for all employees
- Fruit baskets
- Joint, voluntary after-work events
- Special attention at employees' birthdays
- Involvement of employees in the design of workplaces
- Involvement of employees in the design of duty rosters and the possibility of exchanging services with each other

Some of these suggestions do not even cost money and for the others there is no need for a large budget. These are effective symbols that indicate what it is all about: appreciative cooperation as the basis and prerequisite for good and customer-oriented services. You cannot expect an employee to treat customers with courtesy if he or she is not treated with courtesy by his or her superiors and colleagues. The following guiding principle must be remembered again and again:

The way we deal with each other internally is the way our customers experience us.