

**WHY MONEY WON'T CUT IT
AND WHY EXTRA CREDIT MAKES YOU STUPID
– A RESPONSE –**

MICHAEL S. MCGUIRE

In telling us his story of finding focus in his life and in writing, Tom mentions that at one point in the midst of a job that was not right for him, he was just focused on making money. When he writes this, though, he's quick to add that making money "is not in itself a bad thing." I'm going to go one step further here boldly to say this: Just making money in itself *is* a bad thing. And so, by extension doing anything (like college) just for monetary or material gain is a bad thing; it's "bad" in that it will never be enough, and it won't lead to a satisfying life. I realize I'm dancing precariously on the edge of a cliché here, but maybe I can take this beyond platitudes.

I want to talk to you about carrots and sticks. Know the anaology? "Carrots" are those trivial rewards that are designed to motivate you to perform as desired, and "sticks" are there to punish you if the carrots don't work. Now, if you read my chapter "Risky Business Indeed" you know that I am not a big fan of carrot-and-stick tactics because I find them insulting and dehumanizing. That's a moral stance certainly. I think people deserve more than to be treated like animals, but quite frankly that is beside the point because guess what? Carrots and sticks don't work anyway; they just don't work to motivate people or to satisfy people in any sustainable fashion. Carrots—extrinsic rewards like grades and money and pizza parties—do nothing to enhance performance and can actually hamper it instead. Can I get extra credit for that? No, because extra credit points will actually hurt your ability to perform well.

Bestselling author and former speech writer to Al Gore, Daniel Pink, has written much about this topic of human motivation, and he points out some findings coming out of psychology and economics studies from M.I.T., University of Chicago, and Carnegie Mellon that he calls "freaky." What's freaky is that contrary to conventional wisdom when extrinsic rewards like money (and grades) go up for tasks that require even "rudimentary cognitive performance", performance suffers. The typical carrot and stick motivator doesn't work. It does work for fundamental mechanical skills but not for any thing that requires cognitive challenge or creativity (like college, writing, and life). Again, a larger reward leads to poorer performance in cognitive and creative skills. Just to be clear, it's not that it makes no difference at all; it actually makes things worse. Pink suggests from his research that when people are given the promise of an extrinsic reward, they get very focused on their task—narrowing their focus on that which is right in front of them to the point where that's all they can see. So, this works very well, if your task is to screw widget part A to widget part B over and over again on an assembly line day in and day out. If there is a clear and straight path to what you are being asked to do, extrinsic motivators work. However, in college, in most work places today, and in life, the

tasks we face are usually not so simple. They require peripheral thinking, not pinpoint focus. The creative solutions are most often the ones that are not right in front of our noses, and this is why extrinsic rewards that focus us so intensely fail.

So what does work? Pink points to research that suggests there are three factors that lead to better performance and increases in personal satisfaction: 1) autonomy, 2) mastery, and 3) purpose. *Autonomy* is opportunity and ability to be self-directed—that is, to make choices for yourself about what you'd like to work on and how you'd like to do it. *Mastery* is a desire to get better at doing things. This is what drives much of our interest in hobbies like playing softball on the weekends, strumming a guitar, participating in free and open-source software development, playing video games, or working that Hula Hoop in the backyard—all things we might pour great amounts of time into for no money at all. We just enjoy getting better at things. It's the pursuit of mastery over the skill that is enjoyable. Finally, we want to make a contribution, to do something meaningful—to have a *purpose*. Work at your job or in school without an overall sense of purpose usually results in crappy output, plus it's absolutely no fun. So, it is these three factors that are paramount to doing well and enjoying what you are doing—whether we're talking about work, school, writing, or your entire life. These three factors are intrinsic motivators; in other words, they come from inside you rather than extrinsic motivators that come from outside you (like money, material stuff, and grades). The bottom line is if you want to enjoy your life right now and not put it off as some distant goal, adjust your thinking. Create autonomy, a pursuit of mastery, and a sense of purpose in everything you do. A desire for money alone won't cut it. Absolutely, we need money to provide for ourselves and our loved ones—but to organize your entire life around the pursuit of money, to have that be the end in itself, will surely lead to a dissatisfying life. Money, grades, extra credit points, material stuff, proverbial hoops to jump through—none of it will sustain you.

WORKS CITED

Pink, Daniel. "Drive: The Surprising Truth about What Motivates Us." *RSA: 21st Century Enlightenment*. The Royal Society for the Encouragement of Arts, Manufactures, and Commerce. 8 April 2010. Web. 29 May 2010.