A management consultant specializing in police research noticed that, in one community, officers would come on duty for their shift, proceed to get into their police cars, drive to the highway that cut through the town, and speed back and forth along this highway for their entire shift. Clearly this fast cruising had little to do with good police work. But this behavior made considerably more sense once the consultant learned that the community's city council used mileage on police vehicles as a measure of police effectiveness. The city council unintentionally was rewarding "putting lots of miles on police cars," so that's what officers emphasized.

Managers routinely reward employee behaviors they're trying to discourage and fail to reward the behaviors they actually want. A few examples illustrate this sad fact: Management says it wants to build teamwork, actually rewards individual accomplishments, then wonders why employees compete against each other and are constantly looking out for Number One. Management talks up the importance of quality, then ignores employees who turn out shoddy work and punishes those who fail to meet their production goals because
they're focusing on quality. Senior executives speak out loudly about the importance of their managers acting ethically, then give a big promotion to a manager whose ethical conduct is clearly suspect.

Managers who claim that their employees seem to be lacking motivation should review their reward systems to consider the possibility that they're paying off for behavior other than what they're seeking. This review should begin by assessing what types of behaviors are currently being rewarded. What this assessment too often finds is that organizations are not rewarding what they assume they are. Obviously, if this is the case, then the reward system needs to be changed to get the desired behaviors. If you want quality, reward quality. If you want ethical behavior, then reward employees who act ethically.

Modifying reward systems doesn't have to be a complex undertaking. Small adjustments can make big differences. And the little techniques you use at home can often be applied at the workplace. For instance, if you buy a single candy bar for your two kids, can you expect them to fight over who gets which half? Probably. Have you ever just given the candy bar to one of them, told him to cut it in half, and then let his brother or sister have first choice on which half he or she wants? This simple process of rewarding joint responsibility typically results in a precise and fair slicing up of the candy bar and a marked decline in fighting. This same logic was recently used by a department head who had to allocate offices in the company's new building. Two of his employees, who had never gotten along, were wasting a lot of time arguing which one of the 10
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offices allocated to the department each would take. It seemed that whichever one Dave wanted, that would also be the one that Chuck preferred. After weeks of haggling, the department head told Dave to make two choices and that he was going to let Chuck make the first selection and Dave would get the other. The end result was that Dave sought two offices that were both acceptable to him, Chuck got "the pick of the litter," and both were happy.

One last comment. The importance of rewarding the right behaviors never was clearer to me than when I saw a rich relative continually tell her son, "Don't worry about saving money. You'll have plenty when I'm gone." That relative lived a very long life and she could never understand why her son looked forward to her demise. Clearly she would have gotten a very different behavior from her son had she made his inheritance conditioned on her longevity. He would have been far more supportive of her living a long life had she said in her latter years, "I'm going to give you $50,000 the first of every year for as long as I live. But when I go, all my remaining money will go to charity." Had she taken this approach, her son would have a vested interest in prolonging her life, not shortening it!