

The value of spontaneous rewards¹

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There are people who seem to succeed in several pursuits in their life. The indicators of success are that they came on the top, won the finals in a sports event, stood first in the class or were appreciated and recognized for their work in the work place and so on. The standard method to measure this and recognize explicitly is to put a comprehensive reward system in place. The finalist gets a cash prize and a certificate and the person doing a good work in the office is on a fast track in his/her career progression. As a consequence he/she becomes the head of the organization at a young age. A student is given scholarship waiver and spot admission in a good academic institution etc. This has become a universal organizational arrangement world over. Therefore, good work is linked inexplicitly to a system of rewards, which is put in front of everyone, known *a priori* and therefore could be planned for, aimed for etc.

The role of reward systems in work

Once we formalize the system well, the reward system takes over control of everyone. Every individual will be acutely aware of the need to align with the measurement metrics so that rewards are finally received. Therefore this will introduce a basic dilemma in everybody's mind as to whether one should focus on the work or on the results. Very soon the realization will dawn that in a system of rewards based working, results are the key thing. Students (and even educational institutions) will begin to find ways of getting more marks than acquiring knowledge. Organizations will find ways of booking sales as of March 31st than actually supplying high quality goods and services on time. Subordinates will find that praising and worshipping their superiors all the time may be more effective than actually doing good work in getting the rewards. The list of such examples, as we all know, is endless.

From a point of view of institutions and organizations, the results are predictable. Over a period of time our wisdom will tell us that it will be gainful if we can shortchange the system in such a manner that the rewards are more important than the "good work". It is akin to saying the priest must get more prominence and importance over the deity in the temple.

If this is the scorecard for the organizations, what about the individuals? A number of people who seem to have been rewarded for their "good work" have not obtained them without any costs. Top in the list of "side effects" is health. Rewards come with a compromise on health as the journey is very stressful as the carrot of rewards has a lot of uncertainty at the end of the day. Disregarding their physical and mental health, high performers claim that they are the winners. High prevalence of mental health disorders and stress induced chronic diseases such as hypertension and diabetes are indicators of this malaise of the current system of "rewards – work" linkage.

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The second price some individuals pay is that they make huge compromise in their personal life choices. Of what avail is success if it is at the cost of broken families or meaningless homes and relationships. It is as good as having a dish with incomplete ingredients and still fooling ourselves into an impression that we are enjoying a good food. The third consequence is that individuals can potentially be denied of “self-development” in this process. A number of students who are in classes 8 – 12 in this country are walking through this trap, thanks to the current system of using the rewards as the indicator of good work. There are some indications that young and very bright students who cracked the competitive examinations of some top educational institutions in the country are not “full blown individuals”.

The last most disturbing aspect of this manner of measuring good work is that if we do not have a system of rewards in a situation, then it simply leads us to the conclusion that no good work happens in such a place. Does that mean that homemakers are not doing good work? We have a responsibility to answer this question, otherwise there will be no takers for running a home as an institution or doing a variety of work for the love of labour and service.

It appears that the art and science of doing good work is still a work in progress for most of us in the modern society. We need alternative perspectives of good work. We want to know how good work can happen without destroying individuals, stunting their self-development and shortchanging the system. Let us look at one *śloka* in *Bhagavad Gitā* to understand this.

Securing freedom from work

Lord Krishna asks us to derive joy from unprompted, unplanned and instantaneous gains (*yadrucchā-lābhaḥ*) that we get for several actions that we perform in life. He assures us that if we train our mind towards this, we will get several benefits from this new capability that we have acquired. We will be able to truly develop a perspective to various things in life which will enable us to transcend the world of dualities (*dvandvātītaḥ*). This will relieve the mind of needless envy (*vimatsaraḥ*), arising out of good things happening to others and will build in us the skill of evenly treating in our mind success and accomplishments and failures and unaccomplished things even after genuine best efforts (*samaḥ siddhāvasiddhau*). This according to him is the secret formula to get completely liberated from work and its effects on an individual in terms of the outcomes (*kṛtvāpi na nibadhyate*).

यदृच्छालाभसन्तुष्टः द्वन्द्वातीतो विमत्सरः ।

समः सिद्धावसिद्धौ च कृत्वापि न निबध्यते ॥ 4.22

*yadṛucchā-lābha-santuṣṭaḥ dvandvātīto vimatsaraḥ
samaḥ siddhāvasiddhau ca kṛtvāpi na nibadhyate*

The World of work with spontaneous rewards

Suppose a person receives a phone call one day morning from the CEO's office of the organization he/she is working informing him that he/she has been given a special award in recognition of the wonderful work that person has been performing in the organization, the joy this person gets will be boundless. In contrast, if the person managed to get the same recognition by influencing some power centers in the organization the happiness will be short lived. Furthermore, it will discount this person internally, even when he/she bravely sports a happy face to the outside world. These behavioural responses are so universal that it applies from getting the Nobel prize to the simplest positive stroking or mention that a child gets at home from the parents. The most practical and important implication of this *śloka* stems from this understanding of reality.

Let the organizations put up their own set of rewards and metrics for their use. But individuals must develop a different frame of mind to work in an environment characterized by reward systems. If at the end of the day an individual is concerned about his/her self-development, he/she must work with a framework of spontaneous rewards. It is all about engaging in the work (be in the present) and celebrate the rewards and recognitions as they unfold in whatever frequency, form and magnitude in the future. We will truly understand the true power of "love of labour" as opposed to the futility of succumbing to the "world of rewards".

It is easy to dismiss this idea by saying that it doesn't work in reality. The question often put forth is, where is the proof of this hypothesis? All of us in this world have this experience but for some reason have chosen to ignore it as we grow older. Look at a child in the age group of 1 – 3. The child is completely engrossed in doing something or the other all the time and is in the steepest mode of learning. The most important reason for this behavior is that the child is guided by the paradigm of spontaneous rewards as it engages in various tasks. If only the child chose to sit down and start evaluating if it is worth making the efforts to stand-up and take the first baby step, it would have never learnt the art of walking, speaking etc.

If we fail to appreciate the importance of this approach the charm of working will be snatched away from us. Instead, we will set up ourselves into a way of working that is hugely strenuous, leaving behind defeats, unhappiness, jealousy, disappointment and a bad taste at the end of the day.