

Get Things Done with Targeted Symbolic Rewards

An excerpt from *The Power of Double-Goal Coaching* by Jim Thompson

What gets rewarded gets done. What the coach gives attention to gets done because a coach's attention is rewarding to players. However, external rewards undercut internal motivation, especially when people know the reward before they act (this is called a "contingent reward" and should be avoided).

Targeted Symbolic Rewards are a tool to get athletes to act in helpful ways without undercutting internal motivation.

After each game, recognize one or more players who worked hard or completed valuable unsung activities such as marking opponents on defense or hustling after loose balls. Make sure the reward is "symbolic" (not money or something that is of value in and of itself), such as lollipops, stickers, or "game balls," so it won't undercut internal motivation. Be aware that what is symbolic for older athletes (e.g., lollipops – see below) may be very tangible to younger kids who love candy.

John Buxton, Headmaster at Culver Academies (IN), shared with me his lollipop technique. After a game he identifies a handful of players who did something he wants to see more of, especially in terms of effort.

He gives lollipops to players who star in conventional ways (e.g., hitting a home run) but mostly he uses the lollipop to target unsung activities that contribute to the team's success. "Sam, I appreciated you backing up third base on that triple in the fifth inning. You had to be alert and run a long way to get there and that's exactly the kind of thinking and hustle we need to be the best we can as a team."

Over time John makes sure each player gets a lollipop, so it is not just the most talented players who receive them, something deadly to team morale. Lollipops make post-game conversations something players look forward to with anticipation. "Who's going to get a lollipop today for what hustle play?"

Other coaches use the reward of getting to pick the music for the next practice or wearing special practice jerseys that change each week when the targeted symbolic rewards are handed out. Greg Siino, a coach in Roseville, CA, uses the example of the transcontinental railroad to reinforce unsung behavior, a Targeted Symbolic Reward he calls "The Golden Spike Award."

Greg gives out a railroad spike after each game. He has his players visualize a train ride from California to New York. The track guides the train to its goal while many, many railroad spikes hold the track in place. He notes that while the spikes typically go unnoticed, the track would fall apart and the train would derail without the spikes.

He then gives the award to someone who, without calling attention to himself, does something to build the team or build up a teammate. He especially looks for players who react maturely to a bad call, who are able to

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rise above a bad game to help the team, or do something positive when tired at the end of a game or during conditioning.

Targeted Symbolic Rewards work best when you thoughtfully target them to behaviors that you want to see more of from your players. And, as we know from Carol Dweck's *Mindset*, if you reward actions that are the result of talent rather than effort, you are not going to see more effort. Not everyone has the talent to make big plays. But everyone can increase her effort. If players regularly get lollypops for hustling, you are going to see a lot more hustling, guaranteed.

A powerful way to encourage players to become fearless about mistakes is to regularly give out a symbolic reward to a player who messed up but hung in there. Whatever you want to see more of, target a symbolic reward to that behavior, and you will!