

# Health Promotion Practitioner

Practical solutions for health enhancement programming

## “Cash Is King”

**A**t a recent conference in Chicago, a speaker proclaimed “We all know cash is king,” suggesting money is employees’ preferred incentive. No argument. If you want me to take a health risk appraisal and participate in screenings, give me \$100 and I’m there. If you’re going to penalize me with higher premiums for failing to participate, I’ll do it too, though a little less enthusiastically. But just because it works, does it mean it’s the right thing to do for the organization? Does it really have the desired effect long term?

The rationale is that cash drives enough people into the system so that you can identify and intervene with the high-risk individuals — thereby reducing healthcare expense, lowering absenteeism, etc. But what do you do next year? Will the same cash incentive work or will you have to raise the stakes? And what are you really accomplishing for those who are already healthy? Have you created an incentive or a barrier? If you believe keeping the healthy healthy is the real opportunity in your wellness program, are you motivating or demotivating those who are doing exactly what you want?

### Begin With the End in Mind

Unless your organization is going out of business in the next 3 years, your health incentive strategy should be long term. Will you be able to afford the expectations you’re creating this year and next? Will the \$100 reward turn into \$200 or \$300 just to maintain the needed level of participation to produce a positive ROI?

The simple solution appears to be raising the premium to cover the reward, then giving it back. The net effect is

the same, but are you creating a population that says “just tell me what to do to get the money”? The individual goes through the motions — completing the HRA, getting screenings, attending prescribed coaching sessions, or other intervention — but never truly embracing behavior change because they did it “for the money.”

Carried out to its logical conclusion, the *only* result this strategy can lead to is rewarding people for outcomes — BMI, weight, waist circumference, cholesterol, blood pressure. And anyone who’s spent more than 5 minutes contemplating the implications of rewarding outcomes knows that’s not a path the organization wants.

Giving people money for doing something they should want to do for themselves is a little like eating cotton candy when you’re really hungry — it tastes great, but 5 minutes later you’re still hungry. Cash is great for about 5 minutes, then it disappears into the gas tank or the groceries or the whatever, and its motivational value is lost. You may get more mileage out of a \$10 incentive item than a \$100 check.

### Other Common Incentive Mistakes

Longtime *Practitioner* readers know we’re big incentive proponents, but done poorly, your incentive program can work against you. Here’s what to avoid:

- *Repeat winners.* There’s nothing wrong with recognizing continued positive health behaviors, but an incentive setup that rewards top achievers only can turn off those just beginning to make progress. Set rules that keep the same people from earning top prizes month after

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month, yet be sure to acknowledge their efforts with a personal note or call.

- *Low perceived value.* A mug, t-shirt, or other item with a program logo imprint has value well beyond the \$5-\$10 it cost — they appreciate it forever. But when you're rewarding only top achievers or randomly awarding prizes to those who complete the program, you need different items for a bigger perceived value or you'll appear cheap.
- *Everybody wins, no matter what.* The incentive needs to be tied to a significant health behavior, not just spending 30 minutes some day completing a health risk appraisal. The behavior needs to be practiced long enough that the individual experiences the desired health outcome, so they internalize the behavior and want to continue it for themselves — not because they'll get a gym bag. The incentive item itself becomes a visible reminder of reward they've already experienced, beyond the item itself.
- *Narrow focus.* Not everyone can jog 20 miles a week. Setting goals and awarding prizes for all levels of ability will give novice participants — the folks you really want to influence — a chance to feel their efforts are appreciated.

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- *Unrepeatable awards.* If the incentive is too rich this quarter, it can set an expectation for similar rewards down the road. If you can't sustain that level, it sends a message that the behavior you're trying to inspire now is less important than it was back then. Again, think long term when designing your incentive strategy.

Cash may be king today, but unless you think your cash incentives will solve your behavior change challenges 5 or 10 years from now, your short-term success may lead to even bigger challenges. No matter what model you employ, ask yourself if it will lead your population to a healthy lifestyle as its own reward — the ultimate goal of all health promotion programs. 🇺🇸



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