

Experimenting on Human Subjects in the Workplace

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Friedemann Goldberg LLP announced a new program for employees last week. It is really an experiment in sociology. While listening to a Shankar Vedantam podcast called “The Hidden Brain,” I was reminded of a study I learned about in a business class I took back when Jimmy Carter was our president. The study reached the conclusion that, most of the time, a person’s co-workers know more about how hard they work and how well they perform than supervisors or management. The podcast spoke about co-workers giving out bonuses to colleagues. Thus began the Friedemann Goldberg LLP experiment in Co-Worker Appreciation Bonuses.

Once a month and up to four times per year, full-time employees of the firm can direct the firm to give any co-worker a \$50 gift card to express appreciation or admiration of the co-worker. Partners are excluded from giving or getting them, but there aren’t any other rules. The gift can be anonymous or not. All awards are announced weekly.

This program has three prime objectives. First, reward people for being good and helpful co-workers. Even nicer than a thank you or a memo to your employee file is an acknowledgement that comes with a gift. Second, encourage people in a positive, non-threatening way to think about how others have contributed to their workplace satisfaction and, in turn, how they might contribute to the workplace satisfaction of others. Third, invoking the concepts of agile management and non-hierarchical leadership, spread out among the team the responsibility for recognition of exceptional performance and team contribution.

The program has been warmly received and the first round of Co-Worker Appreciation Bonuses have been given out. Stay tuned for updates as the year moves forward on the success—or failure—of this human experiment.