PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT GRANTS FOR MOTIVATING RESEARCH STAFF

by Raymond J. Struyk

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Introduction

It is obvious that a think tank's staff is its most valuable resource. High staff turnover and low productivity are clear signs of an under-motivated staff. Actually, signs of staff ennui in the form of high turnover rates appear to be fairly common. Among the 59 think tanks in transition and developing countries for which I have data on annual turnover rates, 27 percent have rates in the 21-40 percent range and another 13 percent have rates over 41 percent (Struyk 2015, Table 2.4). Such turnover imposes very significant costs on these think tanks in terms of recruiting, on-boarding, and training replacements. What can be done to raise research staff motivation and satisfaction?

Theories on staff motivation can be divided into two groups of motivational structures: those that rely heavily on external rewards and reinforcements (extrinsic or monetary), and those that rely on factors internal to the staff position (intrinsic or non-monetary), as shown in Table 1. Intrinsic incentives either reward by facilitating doing good work or enhance the analyst's self-satisfaction and sense of self-worth. Monetary rewards are certainly also related to performance, but in a way that is external to the work itself.[1]

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To extend this point, experts in human resource management of both for-profit and nonprofit organizations generally feel that adequate base pay is essential to retaining staff and for basic motivation. But other kinds of rewards are more successful in motivating staff to higher levels of achievement. For example, Letts and his colleagues (1999) state that good pay "is more a protection against dissatisfaction than a source of motivation for the long term. Pay cannot substitute for the satisfaction of producing results" (p.123). A case study of a program to reduce staff turnover implemented by Fleet Boston Financial documented the very high impact of nonfinancial rewards complemented by reasonable pay increases (Nalbantian and Szostak 2004).

This article focuses on intrinsic awards and proceeds in two parts. The first explores the range of these awards. Hereafter these are called *Professional Development Grants* (PDGs). I think it likely that most readers will find some of their purposes novel. The second part outlines a practical structure for administering PDGs. In preparing this post I have consulted with three think tanks that I consider well-managed about their current practices and their ideas for improving them. The think tanks are: the Urban Institute, a very large (450 staff), 50-year old think tank in Washington; the Results for Development Institute, a mid-sized (125 staff), 10-year old think tank also in Washington but working exclusively in transition and developing countries; and, the Institute for Urban Economics, a small (40 staff), 20-year old organization in Moscow. Below these are referred to as *participating think tanks*.[2]

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1. Institute-supported training opportunities can also be motivators. They are not discussed here because training differs from awards in that its availability is less discretionary in that all researchers are eligible for certain job-related trainings and the program is administered by HR departments. That said, it is very important for team leaders/center directors to integrate the use of awards and training opportunities.
2. I sincerely thank Margery A. Turner, Tatiana Polidi, and Courtney Tolmie for taking time to be interviewed and reviewing a draft of this report. All opinions are mine.

Professional Development Grants

In contrast to monetary rewards, most think tanks have never really thought about intrinsic awards in a systematic, i.e., strategic, way. This is unfortunate because the very nature of policy research suggests the primacy of factors driving satisfaction are intrinsic to the job.

Successful policy researchers/analysts need to execute three tasks well: be strong researchers; be good managers of research if they are to rise above the research assistant level; and be good promoters of the policy recommendations that emanate from their research, in written presentations and, at least as important, in person. Most think tank analysts receive their greatest personal rewards from doing high quality, policy relevant research that is recognized as such, and from successfully engaging with policy makers so that their work improves public policy and the lives of the people affected by it. Hence, an important question for the think tank manager becomes: How can the institution best facilitate high quality work and reinforce recognition for it, so that analysts are well-satisfied with their positions and, thus likely to continue to be productive and stay at the institute?

My general answer is to maximize the use of intrinsic rewards. Such rewards come in a number of forms as suggested by the list in Table 1. The next few paragraphs discuss several examples of such incentives, some of which may not have been identified by some think tank leaders as motivational tools to be thoughtfully and actively employed.

Table 1. Major research staff incentives employed by think tanks[a]

Monetary (extrinsic)	Non-monetary (intrinsic)
	Generally available
Salary	Working conditions; support
Bonuses	Authorship policy
Fringe benefits	Awards to Individuals
--health insurance	Promotions (requires a career ladder)
--pension contributions	Presentations to the Board of Trustees
--sabbaticals	Conference attendance
	Chances for professional growth
	--participation in policy meetings
	--time to work on publications

a. Excludes training activities

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Authorship

Authoring strong research reports, journal articles and books is fundamentally important for researchers to advance in the policy research world. Competition is keen and many younger analysts do not have a strong sense of how to structure their writings so as to most effectively communicate their analyses and policy prescriptions.

Few topics can be as contentious as determining who will be listed as report or article authors and the order in which they are listed. This is understandable: the stakes are high. Without question, authorship of published documents, especially publications in international peer reviewed journals, is extremely important for researchers' reputations and their value in the market. The "rules" regarding authorship are stated in a number of places. I think the following statement, taken from the policy of one of the participating think tanks, covers the topic well:

> In general, the authors of a book, report, paper or article should be those researchers who have made *significant* intellectual contributions to the research, including, but not limited to, formulating the research design or concept, analyzing and interpreting the data, and writing or rewriting substantial parts of the manuscript. Another condition of authorship is that contributors must be able to explain and answer questions about the research. As a rule of thumb, it's the quality and importance of the intellectual contribution that determines authorship, not the amount of time spent on the project…. Keeping in mind each project member's interests and abilities and their match with the research task at hand, Principal Investigators are encouraged to provide opportunities for staff to make significant intellectual contributions.

Think tanks have a strong incentive to encourage research team leaders to be generous in determining authorship, as the final sentence of this policy statement clearly does. Including someone as an author rewards hard and creative work and establishes a valuable credential for the individual involved. But it also strengthens the person's profile for inclusion in future proposals and adds to the institute's stature. Obviously, younger researchers included as authors generally value this very highly.

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A second action a senior researcher can be stimulated to take is to offer to review a less experienced colleague's draft journal article before submission. Often this is a level of critique that cannot be provided by the author's contemporaries. This kind of mentoring is very highly valued by would-be authors.

PDGs can be used here to fund a couple of days' work for the junior staffer to make a larger contribution than if only project funds were available. Additionally, the Center Director could offer senior analysts covered time to review draft journal articles.

Time to work on a publication

A frequent case is that a good client report could be converted to a journal article with a few days' effort but the analyst really cannot find the time outside of work hours to do it. In such a case the analyst could be given a few days—perhaps a maximum of five days, although fewer are often needed- to produce the draft article. The message to the author from such support is clear: the Institute sees strong potential in you for the organization and will actively help you to advance. The kind of mentoring mentioned in the prior paragraph is a strong complement to the time for drafting the article.

Sometimes a staff member has an idea for a new study that will result in a journal article or book chapter. This will require substantially more time, perhaps three-four weeks of effort. In some cases this can be financed through a PDG. More often the request will have to be forward to the Research Director or the person having such responsibilities for a funding decision with other resources.

Presentations to the Board of Trustees

Boards are nearly always composed of distinguished individuals. They are selected in part so that they will reflect well on the institute. ("If John Jones is a Board member, then the Institute must have a strong reputation…") It follows that an institute's senior researchers welcome the chance to become known to the members.

Board meetings often include one or two senior staff members making presentations on particularly interesting or policy-important projects. Being selected to make such a presentation is typically viewed as a distinct honor. Most think tanks include presenters as guests at the dinner, lunch, or other social event held in conjunction with the Board meeting itself. Seating arrangements can be such that presenters are mixed with Trustees. This gives staff the chance to chat with these luminaries and make a policy point or two, especially if asked the right question.

I was fortunate to make such presentations and attended the accompanying dinners the night before the meetings while I worked at the Urban Institute. I can vouch for the positive effect it has on presenters' view of their place within the organization.

Often preparation for and participation in these meetings are financed from funds earmarked for Board operations. When this is not the case, the Center Director can fill the gap with PDG funds.

Conference participation

Conferences can be a significant opportunity to gain knowledge on the topic of the conference and to network with peers. These are important elements in continuing staff development. For researchers, peers are other analysts and policy makers with a clear interest in the conference's topic.

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When a staff member is invited to give a presentation at a reputable conference, there should be little question about the organization supporting the invitee's participation, so long as she can be counted upon to make a strong presentation. If there is any question about the invitee's ability, then a manager will have to be given responsibility for working with the staff member, including listening to and commenting upon a dry run presentation. Overall, this represents a significant investment in the invitee and one likely to be highly valued by her. The necessary support to the presenter should be explicitly defined in making resources available to avoid confusion when final presentation preparations are being made.

The necessary degree of relevance and prestige of conferences typically is much greater to warrant support when conference is not being held locally. Travel costs and additional staff time associated with the travel are important factors.

Decisions on attendance as a non-presenter are more complex. The more directly relevant the conference topic is to that on which staff work consistently, or are working at the time, the stronger is the case for being there. Supervisors vary sharply in their views about the utility of their staff attending many conferences because of the opportunity cost of their other work. Consequently, non-presenting attendance is often viewed as a reward for good work. PDGs are the clear choice for supporting participation.

Participation in policy meetings

This is about encouraging and mentoring someone just reaching the senior analyst level. Usually these are people who have strong technical competence but are just learning how to move analytic results into policy discussions.

The standard scenario for "marketing" policy findings is for an established senior analyst to meet for this purpose with a fairly senior member of the government, a legislator or a CSO leader active in this particular area.

There is a much better scenario. Instead of going alone to these meetings she could take the new senior-level person with her, being careful to make certain that the new person understands his role in the meeting. The new person sees how such meetings are conducted, the technical level of discussion, and what kind of follow-up can result.

Think of the results of this being done consistently over a number of meetings over a year or so. The new person learns, for example, what kinds of issues are discussed and which issues are of greater interest to agency officials (who have to administer programs) compared with someone in the Ministry of Finance who is focused on expenditures and effectiveness. The less senior person learns how to prepare for these meetings.

It is incumbent on the senior person to be clear about the other staffer's role and the preparation necessary for the meeting.

This is mentoring at its best and the new person knows it. He may also bask in telling his friends that he has been meeting with such officials. The staffer feels very good about himself. This is major incentive to continue being highly productive, stay at the institute, and help others.

Administering the grants

Two attributes characterize the awards just listed and others of a similar nature. First, individually they usually are not costly. Indeed, some are likely to be cheap. Preparing for and participating in a policy meeting often involves a total of a few hours. Second, many need to be carefully targeted to be effective in increasing a researcher's job satisfaction and enhance her professional development.

The focus in this section is PDGs to individual researchers, i.e., those listed in lower part of the right-hand column of Table 1.

As to overall funding senior management must decide on: (1) the total resources to be made available for all PDGs and (2) how to allocate them among competing opportunities. The resources for these grants are part of overhead costs. Determining the total resources to be available for the PDGs is made as part of the annual review of overhead spending and projections of the next year's volume of business and associated overhead resources that will be generated.

Interestingly the manager interviewed at one of the participating think tanks reported that it does not define resources for PDGs in preparing its annual budget. Rather all such activities are funded through externally financed projects. The interviewee said that they had been successful in being able to include sufficient funds for conference attendance, multiple staff participating in policy meetings and other activities of the kind listed in Table 1 in their budgets. Even some international travel had been budgeted for two staff to conduct policy discussions with counterparts so that the discussions would be richer and the less senior person would gain experience in participating in such meetings. Where needed, training resources could sometimes be accessed.

Worth noting is that the organization's funding comes primarily from foundations and awards are often sole source rather than obtained from bilateral or multilateral agencies through competitive processes. The rest of this section relies primarily on information provided by the other two of the participating think tanks.

A simple and equitable way to make the allocation to team leaders/center directors is based on the share of their groups' annual staff salaries in total research staff salaries. (Salaries are better than head counts because most PDGs consist primarily in staff time; the all-in costs of even international conference attendance, for example, are often dominated by staff compensation.) Both of the participating think tanks using PDGs do this.

Once a center's PDG budget has been set, the major question becomes who decides on making PDG commitments. The experience of the participating think tanks is to decentralize as much of this decision making as possible to team leaders. They know their team members better than senior management or the HR office, and they can see when a particular award may be particularly effective. Importantly, team leaders/center directors close contact with their team members, especially through the annual staff assessment process, gives them insights into each staffer's strengths and weaknesses and where a particular award would be most productive. Where teams are large, say over 10-15 staff, center directors often find it useful to delegate reviews of staff PDG requests to those leading individual smaller teams.

The final incentive issue is how team leaders/center directors allocate the award funds given them to use. Allocations need to be both: (1) equitable (staff performing similar tasks receive similar benefits but not necessarily for the same purposes) and (2) given to promote greater productivity.

A generally accepted principle is that researchers get about the same number of days to devote to PDG-supported activities. A senior manager at a participating think tank made the useful observation that larger think tanks likely share these resources more equitably among staff than their smaller counterparts, because the larger ones are almost certain to have more written guidelines governing the reward distribution. Actually, only one participating think tank has any guidelines for center directors on how to deploy PDG funds, which I view as problematic.

In maintaining equity among staff, managers I know have found it useful to prepare a matrix with staff listed across the top and incentives down the left-hand side. The matrix has three columns for each staff member—the prior two years and this year—so the manager can easily keep track of what s/he has done for each staffer over time. It is useful to enter both the purpose of the award and its cost to the institute. The matrix also comes in handy when senior management wants to discuss how the manager has used his/her allocations in the past year or two.

There is, of course, always the danger of favoritism or discrimination. The positive effects of an award system can quickly dissipate if staff believes the allocation process is unfair. I strongly encourage executive directors to require that logs of the type just described be kept up-to-date and that they be examined a couple times a year to check for clear cases of favoritism toward or discrimination against individual staffers. Just knowing that their logs will be checked will strongly encourage award givers to think carefully about the way they distribute them among staff.

Usually but not always use of PDG funds is initiated by the staffer. Approval for standard uses of the funds is generally routine. The process is quite informal but an estimate of expected costs is prepared.

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However, an important goal should be for PDG funds to be used to help achieve the staff development goals defined as the key result of the Annual Staff Assessment process. Hence, it may be that a request to attend a conference is turned down by the manager with the funds allocated to the same staffer instead to convert a report to a journal article, consistent with the manager and staffer having agreed in the Assessment that the staffer needed to generate more publications to establish herself as a significant analyst in her field.

Lastly, a word on tracking the spending through PDGs. Both of the participating think tanks that employ PDGs have time management (time sheet) systems in place to record the time staff devote to various activities, and they use them for PDGs. The usual procedure, among thinks I know about, is for each Center to set up a project account in the time management system for PDGs. A task within the project account is established for each activity approved using PDG funds. Managers then use the bi-weekly or monthly spending reports to track the spending under each grant, both for labor and other direct charges. Of course, where the time management system is absent, more approximate methods must be used.

Concluding

Creating and administering an incentive system is a major task demanding, at least in the development stage, a good deal of time from the HR Director, senior management, and team leaders. They will all have views on which incentives will be most effective with various staff groups. Taking the time for a full discussion is well worth it in terms of stimulating thinking about different types of grants aimed at increasing staff productivity and retention.

The guiding idea should be that many types of PDGs can be employed by a team leader/center director to stimulate her staff; they need not be on an "approved list." Managers should be encouraged to think creatively—and be prepared to explain why a certain type of award is appropriate to the development of an individual staff member. Where novel uses of PDGs appear to work well in boosting staff job satisfaction and productivity, they should be shared with other managers.

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