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Who benefits from praise?

Konstanz researcher publishes study on how recognition affects motivation

Verbal recognition of performance works, but perhaps in a somewhat unexpected way: Recognition motivates individuals who were not praised rather than those in the limelight. This is the message of a recent study done by Nick Zubanov, a professor of business economics at the University of Konstanz, and Nicky Hoogveld from the Dutch Ministry of Economic Affairs, which is forthcoming in the Journal of Behavioral and Experimental Economics.

The researchers conducted an experiment with a cohort of more than 300 first-year students in the Netherlands who attended microeconomics tutorials in 15 pre-selected and stable groups. The top 30% students in 8 randomly chosen groups were unexpectedly praised for their performance on the first of the two midterm exams in front of their peers. Compared to similarly good students in the “control” groups, where no such recognition was given, they did no better on the second midterm. However, and, again, compared to their likes in the control groups, the students whose grade fell just a little below the top 30% of their group improved their second midterm grade significantly.

Nick Zubanov sees these findings as evidence for conformity to the performance norm: “Human behaviour is influenced by the individual’s personal understanding of the norm. This applies for academia as well as business environments. Student performance is influenced not only by personal benefits, such as grades or passing an exam, but also by the existing performance norms.” The verbal recognition of performance serves here as an instrument by which the norm is communicated. If an individual is praised, chances are he or she fulfils the performance norm. On the other hand, those not recognised will learn that they may have been too optimistic about fulfilling the norm and will hence work harder. There are of course other, more powerful, reasons why people work or study hard, but the very existence of these reasons makes Hoogveld and Zubanov’s findings all the more remarkable. One lesson to learn from their study is that a simple “well done” said in the right way makes some people feel better and others work harder.

Facts:

- Study on the effect of recognition on motivation
- Original publication: Hoogveld, N. Zubanov, The power of (no) recognition: Experimental evidence from the university classroom, Journal of Behavioral and Experimental Economics (2016)
- Online under: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.socec.2016.11.001>

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