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THE TOKEN ECONOMY

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The Token Economy was the mainstay of traditional Behavior Modification. Today, it is considered passé and its use even discouraged in some circles. The current Pennsylvania Community Home Regulations consider a Token Economy to be a 'Restrictive Intervention'. John McGee, the Father of Gentle Teaching, refers to the Token Economy as "the Psychologist's answer to Capitalism". Depending on your economic viewpoint, those are rather strong words.

In the traditional Token Economy, tokens are given as rewards for completing select desirable activities (If John makes his bed, he will get 2 tokens). The actual tokens can take a variety of forms: bingo chips, poker chips, washers, points recorded on a card, etc. The participant accumulates the tokens which later can be used to make purchases in a 'Token Store'. The Token Store can be a real place where various items are displayed or it can be just on paper like an Order Form. The Token Store can include items (toiletries, food items, etc.) or certificates for various activities (trip out for lunch, play Nintendo for 1/2 hour, etc.).

If giving tokens is a reward, then taking tokens can be used as punishment. The Token Economy can include 'token fines' for the occurrence of select undesirable behaviors (if John hits someone, he must pay 3 tokens). If such fines are to be used, they should not be added until the economy is well established. It is often difficult to get people to pay these fines. If the person values the tokens, it is tough to get them to give them up. Sometimes you end up with IOU's and future tokens earned are used to pay fines (like getting docked on a paycheck). Usually there needs to be a bankruptcy clause in the economy -- it is not good for someone to go too far in the hole -- it can be awfully demoralizing.

A variant of the Token Economy which I still make use of is Behavioral Contracting. A written Contract is developed specifying that if the person completes some number of defined positive activities, then some designated reward will be provided. In essence, each completion of one of the activities is worth one credit toward completing the Contract. In this case, the credit on the Contract is the token. Depending on the functional level of the person, the Contract might include circles to be colored in, blocks to be initialed, etc. as the way of concretely making clear to everyone the progress toward its fulfillment.

With Behavioral Contracting, it's real easy to add a punishment comparable to a 'token fine'. The Contract can simply identify that if some specified behavior occurs some set number of times (which can be just once), the Contract is voided and all is lost.

Like anything else, the Token Economy has its advantages and disadvantages. Token Economies have been used most frequently in institutions and in classroom settings. They are ideal for working with a group of people (patients, students, etc.). There is structure, but with some flexibility. The ways to earn tokens and to spend tokens can be the same for everyone or can be individualized. The participants get to make choices - how to earn tokens and then how to spend them. It can help insure everyone is treated fairly: the potential for consistency is enhanced, consequences are established up front and not after the fact, expectations and responsibilities are clear. It provides a medium for increasing constructive interactions between all parties.

Even without using token fines, realize that depending on how the Token Economy is set up and implemented it is not necessarily all positive. The token rewards can be used to control participants (if John does not earn the necessary tokens, he cannot get the item/activity he wants to buy). Beyond that, the items/activities that can be bought with the tokens might be things the person has a right to in the first place (if John pays 5 tokens, he can use the telephone to call his Mother).

The need for a Token Economy tends to suggest there is something missing in the person's natural environment. A Token Economy is an artificial substitute for natural incentives (John brushes his teeth to earn 2 tokens, rather than to freshen his mouth because he is going out on a date). This is why the Token Economy has been so useful in the institutional setting. Realize in this case though, that it is not necessarily the Token Economy which is the problem, but the environment which necessitates its use in the first place!

Probably the most reasonable use of a Token Economy is as a person's preparation to one day getting a paying job (McGee was right → as training in Capitalism). Earning an allowance for completing chores at home can be seen as a kind of Token Economy. It leads to one day getting a job cutting grass, delivering papers, etc. and ultimately other competitive employment. If it includes the right tasks to earn tokens and the right items/activities to buy with the tokens, the Token Economy can be helpful to teach the person that certain things in life need to be earned (at least, in our capitalistic society!)

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