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Elements of clarification on the Canadian Armed Forces' proposed FORCE Incentive Program: A response to Major Draho's "An Alternate View of Incentivized Fitness in the Canadian Armed Forces," (CMJ Vol. 15, No. 3, Summer 2015)

by Michael Spivock

Background

One of the privileges of performing fitness research for the Canadian Armed Forces (CAF), and perhaps more particularly, physical activity promotion research, is that there is no lack of support and interest from our target population. Cast not only as a cornerstone of military performance, but also as a lifestyle that is so relatable, tangible, and personal to many of our men and women in uniform, fitness represents an issue that the chain of command, as well as the general CAF population, are always willing to discuss and debate with us. These exchanges are essential in shaping and improving the fitness standards and programs that we provide to the CAF. Major Draho's opinion piece *An Alternate View of Incentivized Fitness in the Canadian Armed Forces* (CMJ Vol. 15, No. 3, Summer 2015) is a great example of the well-expressed and collegial discussions that we have had with hundreds of CAF personnel over the past two years in the development of the FORCE Incentive program. In fact, the entire project is based upon the results of approximately 15,000 questionnaires and

seven focus groups which sought to uncover what CAF personnel would find motivating and attainable in a fitness rewards program. Our role in such projects is always one of facilitation, striving to find an ideal way ahead at the intersection of the scientific evidence base, the opinions of our men and women in uniform, and the logistical constraints of the CAF.

Major Draho appears to have attended a town hall-style meeting with Commodore Watson, our Director General Morale and Welfare Services, and has written a very thoughtful piece, based upon information provided relating to the upcoming FORCE Incentive Program. Although we respect and appreciate Major Draho's opinions, they appear to be based upon some inaccurate interpretations of the facts. To be sure, a project involving this level of detail in statistics, exercise motivation, exercise physiology, and human resources management can hardly be explained in a few minutes as part of a broad and all-encompassing town hall on morale and welfare issues in the CAF. We are therefore grateful to Major Draho for raising the issue, and to the editor of CMJ for allowing us the forum to provide some background on this complex and important subject.

Structure of the individual rewards program

The first concern brought forth by the author is in relation to “the relative importance of fitness in identifying our future leaders.” Major Draho appears to be working on the assumption that only the top 2 percent of the CAF in terms of fitness will receive points at the promotion board level. In fact, the proposed program (as approved by Armed Forces Council [AFC] in February 2015) is much more comprehensive and inclusive than that (Figure 1). Based upon the results of over 35,000 FORCE Evaluations performed in the CAF, frequency distributions were produced by gender and 5-year age group. Within each group, age and gender-specific scoring tables were developed for each of the four FORCE Evaluation components, wherein each test element is scored on a scale of 100 points, for a total of 400 points on the overall test. The proposal for the incentive program is to establish a bronze, silver, gold, and platinum category, based upon whether-or-not an individual falls above the mean, or 1, 2, or 3 standard deviations above the mean respectively, for their age and gender group.

More concretely, this means that anyone who scores better than 50 percent of their age-and- gender-matched counterparts on the FORCE Evaluation will fall in the bronze category, thus entering the incentive program and becoming eligible for merit board points. If they score better than 84 percent of their cohort, they will attain the silver category and receive maximal merit board points. Outperforming 98 percent percent of one’s counterparts will earn the gold, and finally, the fittest 0.1 percent of people in each age/gender category will attain the platinum level. It is important to note at this stage that although the incentive program structure

was approved by AFC in February 2015, the logistics of assigning and administering rewards are currently being addressed by the Chief of Military Personnel within the CAF, and the rewards themselves could change prior to their scheduled implementation in April 2017.

Intrinsic vs extrinsic motivation: More than meets the eye

Major Draho’s second concern is in relation to the distinction between intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. He correctly points out that ideally, CAF personnel should be intrinsically motivated to exercise and remain fit by virtue of the fact that they wear the uniform. Unfortunately, this is simply not the case in the CAF, as evidenced by the results of the 2008/2009 Health and Lifestyle Information Survey which showed that less than half the CAF can be considered physically active (Born *et al* 2010). The author is also correct in pointing out that a purely extrinsic motivator (i.e. dangling a carrot in front of someone) is only effective as long as the carrot remains. What he failed to consider, however, are the steps between purely intrinsic and purely extrinsic motivation, and the empirical research supporting a shift from one to the other. The incentive program is based upon Self-Determination Theory—the most widely accepted framework for the study of individual human motivation, which presents several ‘shades of grey’ between the poles of purely intrinsic and purely extrinsic motivation (Deci & Ryan, 1995). It posits that external or extrinsic motivation exists upon a spectrum from most to least autonomous, where more autonomous motivation represents a higher likelihood of lifelong behavioural adherence.

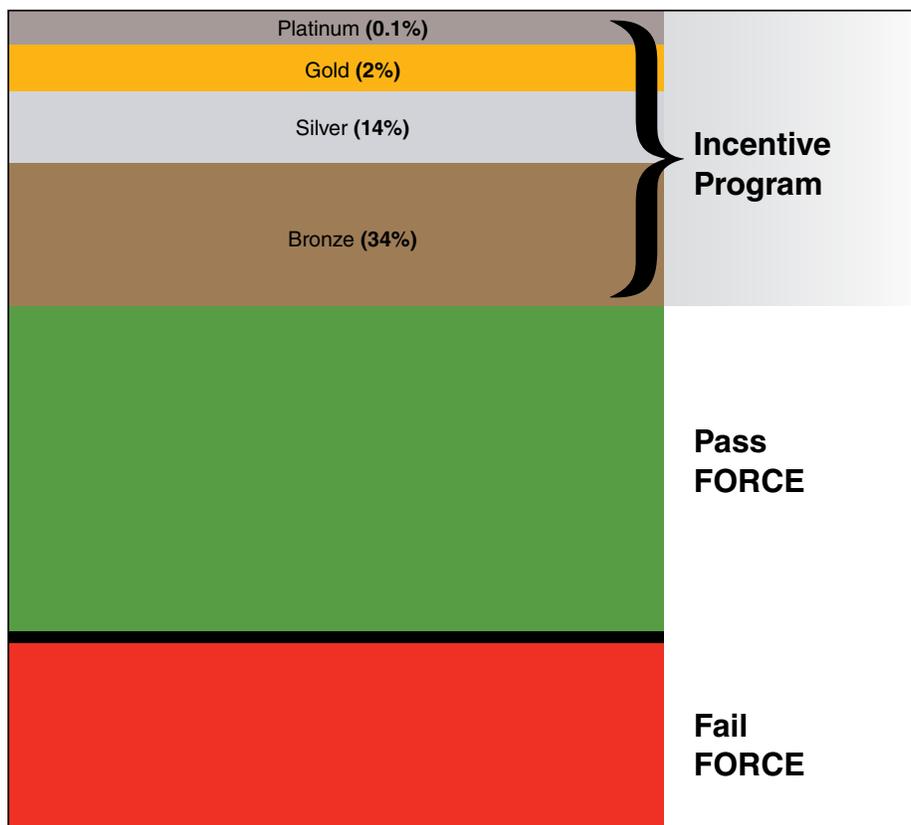


Figure 1 – Individual incentive program structure

Externally regulated behaviour is the *least* autonomous. It is performed because of external demand or possible reward, i.e., “I will perform better on my fitness test if there is a financial incentive to do so.” Introjected regulation of behaviour describes taking on regulations to behaviour, but not fully accepting said regulations as one’s own, playing more to social recognition, i.e., “I will perform better on my fitness test if I get to wear a t-shirt or a pin to show people how well I did.” Regulation through identification is a more autonomy driven form of extrinsic motivation. It involves consciously valuing a goal or regulation so that said action is accepted as personally important, i.e., “I will perform better on my fitness test, if it advances me in my career—promotions are important to me.”

Integrated Regulation is the most autonomous kind of extrinsic motivation. Occurring when regulations are fully assimilated with oneself so they are included in a person’s self-evaluations and beliefs on personal needs, “I will

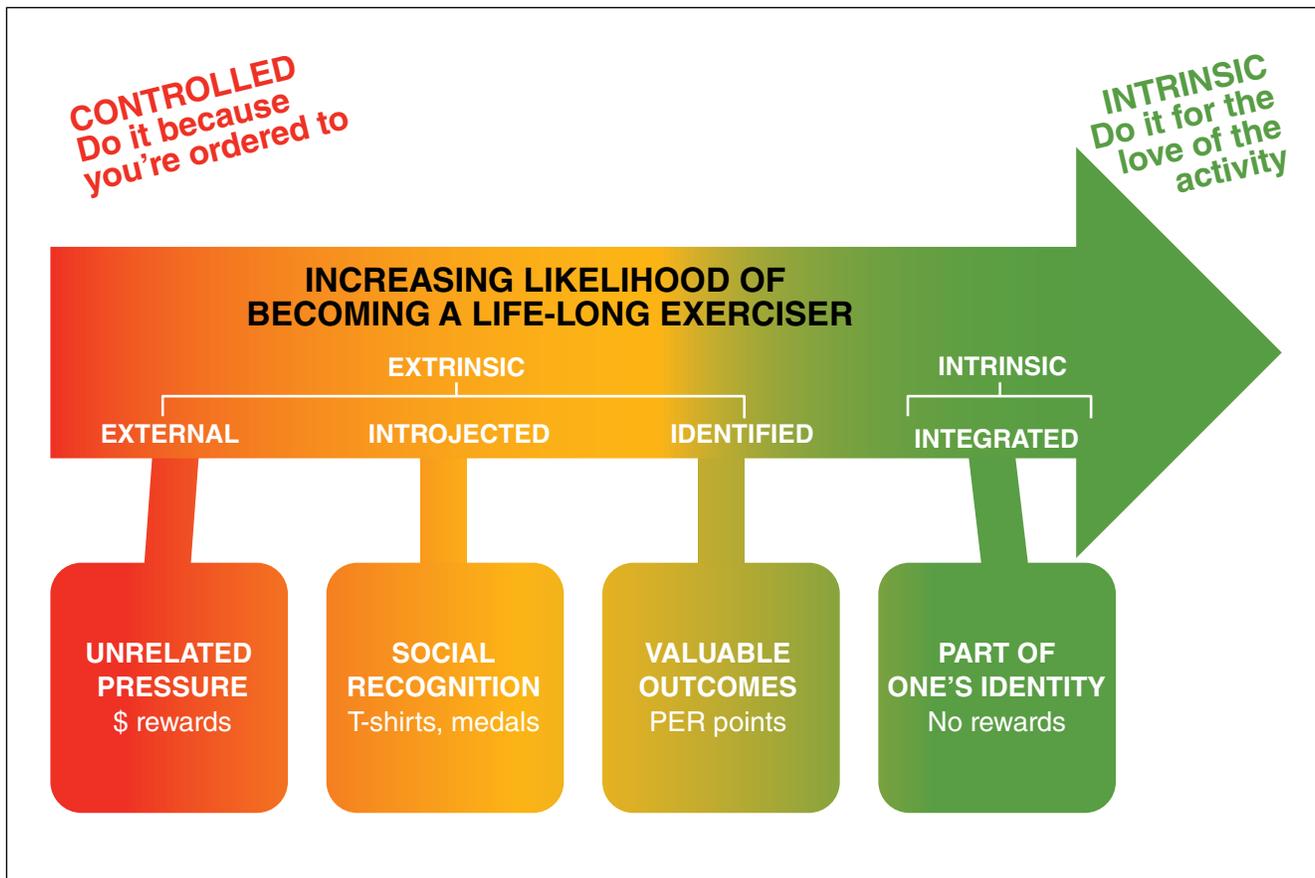


Figure 2 – Different levels of motivation according to Self-Determination Theory

perform better on my fitness test because I am a soldier and this is what I do.” The proposed rewards program includes elements from each of these levels, in order to gradually assist in shifting people from a less to a more autonomous stage. Figure 2 summarizes these different levels of motivation.

Group rewards: Creating a culture of fitness at the unit level

To Major Draho’s concluding point about a culture of fitness, great attention has been given to this concept. In fact, throughout the research process on individual-level rewards, a view was constantly encountered both in the literature and with CAF personnel in surveys and focus groups—that of group-level rewards. The opinion often expressed by lower performing personnel in particular (those who were just barely passing their FORCE Evaluation) was that the 50 percent cut-off required to enter the incentive program at the bronze level could seem quite unattainable to some. This is particularly relevant, given that lower performers on the FORCE Evaluation are at higher risk of mortality/morbidity, as well as being more likely to become an administrative burden on the personnel management system. It was expressed repeatedly in the focus groups that if a lower-performing individual understood that their result was used to calculate an overall unit mean, and that a small improvement on their part could serve to improve the overall standing of their unit, they could be motivated to shave a few seconds off their time on a particular FORCE

Evaluation element. This view is well-supported in the scientific literature as well. When one examines motivation at the group level, analogous studies in the sport literature illustrate the Köhler effect—that lower performing group members have significantly greater motivational gains than higher performing team mates when placed in a group setting (Osborne *et al*, 2012). Furthermore, this same study showed no evidence of social loafing effects—a situation where weaker team members would take advantage of the group setting and let themselves be “carried” by the stronger ones. Having fitter unit members encourage their less fit colleagues in attaining a common goal and building upon the *esprit de corps* and inter-unit competitiveness inherent to the CAF, a group rewards program shows great promise in creating a culture of fitness at the unit level.

In order to develop the group rewards program, the CAF was broken into seven Commands (i.e., Army, Navy, Air Force, Military Personnel Command, Canadian Joint Operations Command, VCDS, and all the ADMs together as one command), as it was decided that unit recognition would occur at the command level. The research team held several meetings with representatives from each command in order to determine an optimal clustering structure and preferences for the nature of group rewards, as well as logistical requirements in administering these rewards. Units are currently being clustered within each command, based upon operational tempo and time allotted for physical training during the work day in order to compare similar units.

Conclusions

As can be gleaned from this response, despite approval in concept from AFC, several details of the FORCE Incentive Program remain unconfirmed. Details will be provided by official channels as they become available. What is clear, however, is that no fitness test, no matter how intricate and sophisticated, can be expected to single-handedly improve the culture of fitness in the CAF. Improving the operational and health-related fitness of CAF personnel will be a function of what happens on the other 364 days of the year, and not on testing day. The programs, services, leadership, and resources that personnel encounter on a daily basis are key to shaping their lifestyle choices in relation to physical activity. For example, a recent CAF study shows a direct positive link between leadership support/role modeling of physical activity and the likelihood of the leader's subordinates being active. The Chief of the Defence Staff Guidance to the Canadian Armed Forces in 2013 clearly imparts upon leaders the importance of promoting a culture of strong mental and physical fitness and bolstering fitness programs. It is for this reason that the CDS has tasked the Directorate of Fitness with the development of a new, comprehensive CAF Fitness and Wellness Strategy, one which considers and addresses individual, inter-personal, unit, command, and CAF-wide influences on physical activity. Several of the points raised by Major Draho are at the forefront of this strategy, and it is our hope that we can continue to rely upon the input of CAF personnel in this and all other initiatives.

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