

TELL US HOW WE ARE DOING: MOTIVATING TEAMS THROUGH FEEDBACK VS. PUBLIC RECOGNITION

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MAIN MESSAGES

- **Motivating service providers to improve the quality of public service delivery is a major development challenge across the globe.** This is particularly relevant for women, who are over-represented as providers of essential public services such as healthcare and education in Africa. Since most public workers receive fixed wages, it is important to understand how non-financial incentives can motivate service providers and improve performance.
- In the context of a national school nutrition program in the Western Cape province of South Africa, we offered either private feedback or public recognition to female school-feeding teams to examine the effectiveness of different incentives schemes when financial rewards are not available.
- **Receiving private feedback on performance boosted workers' effort more than public recognition.** Teams receiving feedback performed better than those which received both feedback and public recognition, especially when their initial performance was low.
- **These results suggest that providing performance feedback can be an effective policy for motivating female teams and improving service delivery, more so than mechanisms leveraging public image.**

GENDER INNOVATION LAB

The Gender Innovation Lab (GIL) conducts impact evaluations of development interventions in Sub-Saharan Africa, seeking to generate evidence on how to close gender gaps in earnings, productivity, assets, and agency. The GIL team is currently working on over 70 impact evaluations in more than 25 countries with the aim of building an evidence base with lessons for the region.

The impact objective of GIL is increasing take-up of effective policies by governments, development organizations, and the private sector to address the underlying causes of gender inequality in Africa, particularly in terms of women's economic and social empowerment. The Lab aims to do this by producing and delivering a new body of evidence and developing a compelling narrative, geared towards policymakers, on what works and what does not work in promoting gender equality.

CONTEXT

Women in Africa are over-represented as providers of essential public services such as healthcare and education. In South Africa for instance, 90 percent of all registered nurses and 75 percent of primary school teachers are women. As in many other parts of the world, they often receive modest salaries or small stipends that may not be sufficient to encourage and reward good performance. In the absence of financial incentives, it is important to identify alternative ways to motivate public sector work teams in order to improve service delivery. Private feedback has been shown to increase effort when individuals are intrinsically motivated, while public recognition can improve effort when individuals are motivated by their image or reputation. However, the literature that compares the effect of private feedback to public recognition is narrow and has found mixed results. Furthermore, less is known about how teams in the workplace respond to non-financial group incentives. On one hand, team incentives may reduce individual effort through free riding. On the other hand, teams may respond more strongly than individuals to incentives. This intervention aims to build the evidence on which tools can most effectively motivate female school-feeding teams in the absence of financial rewards.

HERE'S WHAT WE DID

The World Bank's Africa Gender Innovation Lab and J-PAL Africa conducted a randomized controlled trial to test ways to improve team performance in the absence of monetary incentives. The study took place in the context of the National School Nutrition Program (NSNP) in the Western Cape Province of South Africa, managed by the Peninsula School-Feeding Association. School-feeding teams, composed of two to five female workers, were tasked with delivering nutritious school meals to students in a timely and professional manner, for a low flat-rate monthly stipend. Over a 6-month period, 450 school-feeding teams were assigned to

receive either (i) private feedback on their absolute and relative performance and progress using report cards, (ii) recognition for top performers in a public ceremony with a symbolic award (team aprons) at the end of the semester, (iii) a combination of both or (iv) no intervention. All teams received letters stating job expectations and performance evaluation criteria at the onset of the experiment. Performance was measured across four main areas: safety and hygiene, staff commitment, timely delivery of nutritious school meals, and handling of stock. This randomized experiment provides the opportunity to assess the effectiveness of these two incentive schemes, implemented both independently and jointly, in improving teams' effort and performance.

HERE'S WHAT WE FOUND

- **When implemented independently, private feedback was more effective at boosting team effort than public recognition.** All three interventions induced an increase in overall scores in the second semester. However, breaking down the results for the different components of performance reveals that the higher scores among feedback teams were driven primarily by staff commitment, a proxy for volunteers' motivation. On staff commitment specifically, private feedback teams significantly outperformed not only comparison teams by 0.33 standard deviations, but also public recognition teams by 0.21 standard deviations.
- **Combining both incentives yields no additional benefit, but rather lowers the impact of feedback on overall performance.** The effects for schools receiving both private feedback and public recognition were lower than for schools that only received feedback. This suggests that in this setting, private feedback and public award tend to substitute rather than complement each other, and that intrinsic



motivation is a slightly stronger performance driver than image motivation under fixed-wage incentives.

- **Performance feedback primarily benefited the low-ability school-feeding teams.** Underperforming teams' motivation and productivity improved significantly more when they received private feedback compared to receiving public recognition. Instead, the public recognition intervention dampened low-ability workers' performance. This suggests that among low-ranked schools, private feedback alone is the most effective way to improve team's overall performance and motivation.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

The finding that private feedback is sustainably more effective than public awards at raising low-performing teams' quality of work has important implications for policies that aim to improve the quality of service delivery from fixed-wage workers. These findings suggest that intrinsic motivation may be a slightly stronger performance driver than image motivation under fixed-wage incentives. More specifically, providing detailed feedback on team performance can be an effective policy tool for boosting workers' effort and guiding more effort towards initially weak areas.

Notably, workers in this study were exclusively women, which prevents us from identifying gender differences in response to incentives. There is evidence on competitive motives being higher among men than women ([Barankay, 2012](#); [Huberman et al., 2004](#); [Gneezy et al., 2003](#)), suggesting that male teams might respond better to public recognition. Further research should test the gender sensitivity of these results, by varying the gender composition of teams.

For more information on this study, see the published paper: [“Motivating Teams: Private Feedback and Public Recognition at Work”, Journal of Public Economics, Vol. 197, May 2021.](#)

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