

We're awarding the Order of Australia to the wrong people

Written by Nicholas Gruen, Adjunct Professor, Business School, University of Technology Sydney

It's almost Australia Day and hundreds of us are in line for an award.

Sadly, as unpublished research by my firm Lateral Economics reveals, many will get it for little more than doing their job. And the higher the job's status, the higher the award.

Governors General, High Court Justices and Vice Chancellors of major universities would hope for the highest Companion of the Order (AC). Professors, public service departmental heads and senior business people should hope for the next one down – an Officer of the Order (AO). School Principals would generally slot in next for Members of the Order (AM).

If you're lucky, or you've done your job extraordinarily well, you'll be promoted one rank, but that's pretty much it.

We reward most the already rewarded

Meanwhile, those who succeed in some achievement principally in and for their community usually qualify for the lowest award, if that; the Medal of the Order (OAM). And usually only if they've become conspicuous.

The level of gratitude among recipients seems to follow an equal and opposite arc. Those at the bottom seem the most thrilled for being recognised the least.

Distinction in putting others first gets short shrift. As Anne Summers [lamented](#) in 2013:

Seven years ago I nominated a woman I admire for an Australian honour. It took two years but it came through and she was awarded a Medal of the Order of Australia (OAM) for a lifetime of work with victims of domestic violence. I was disappointed she had not been given a higher award – I had hoped for an AM (Member of the Order of Australia) at the very least – but she was thrilled and so was her family.

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Money, fame and status are nothing to be sneezed at if they are honestly earned. But they are their own reward. Why should they beget other rewards?

We could be putting awards to use

Here's an idea. Why don't we award honours to encourage people to do more than their job? In a world that is lavishing increasing rewards on the "haves", the worldly rewards for doing your job need little bolstering.

Knowing awards are reserved for people who do more than their jobs might encourage us to choose more selfless and socially committed lives at the outset of our careers.

There's a hunger among the young to do just that – to combine good, privately rewarding careers with serving their community and tackling social ills.

If honours are "the principal means by which the nation officially recognises the merit of its citizens" as the 2011 [Government House](#) review put it, I'd like to use it to encourage those people the most.

Wouldn't it be more consistent with Australian values?

It'd make them more Australian

Government House provides online biographies of all those awarded honours. Lateral Economics sampled about half of them back to 2013 looking specifically at the gender division of honours and the extent to which those biographies included descriptions of work done without personal gain.

Barely more than a quarter of Order of Australia recipients recorded voluntary work in their biographies.

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And those that did were more likely to be near the bottom of the awards ladder.

More than a third of those receiving the very bottom award, the OAM, were engaged in obviously selfless work, compared with a fifth at the top (just two out of ten ACs).

Still we may be making a little progress. Perhaps spurred by sentiments such as those expressed by Anne Summers, last year saw a higher percentage of women than in any previous year. Unusually, six women got the top honour, the AC, compared with four men, and the proportion with voluntary service broke through the 30% barrier for the first time.

I wonder what Australia Day will bring. I'm thinking that, whatever it is, we can do a lot better, for our community, and our country.

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