NEW RESEARCH BOOK REVEALS KEYS TO EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT

What is the single most important factor in employee engagement? Incentives, recognition for good work, support for making progress in the work, interpersonal support, or clear goals? Harvard Business School Professor Teresa Amabile and developmental psychologist Steven Kramer asked this question of hundreds of managers from dozens of companies around the world. Shockingly, 95% of managers got it wrong.

In THE PROGRESS PRINCIPLE: Using Small Wins to Ignite Joy, Engagement, and Creativity at Work (August 2011 / Harvard Business Review Press), Amabile and Kramer draw on three decades of research and nearly 12,000 diary entries from more than 200 employees to reveal the truth. Employees’ biggest motivator is making consistent, meaningful progress, and the best managers support them in making that progress.

Amabile and Kramer explain how great inner work life – positive emotions, strong internal motivation, and favorable perceptions about colleagues and the work itself – is key to an innovative, productive, engaged, and committed workforce. Creating favorable circumstances so that employee’s inner work lives are mostly positive is crucial to successful management. Herein lies the beauty of the Progress Principle for today’s leaders. “As long as the work is meaningful, managers do not have to spend time coming up with ways to motivate people to do that work. They are much better served by removing barriers to progress and helping people experience the intrinsic satisfaction that derives from accomplishment,” say the authors.

In THE PROGRESS PRINCIPLE, readers will discover:

• Small wins often have a surprisingly strong effect on people and performance
• Small setbacks can have a disproportionately negative effect
• Key leverage points for managers to use as catalysts for team success
• The importance of the “nourishment factor” that provides interpersonal support
• How to sustain virtuous cycles and halt vicious ones
• How to create an environment for optimal innovative performance
A Daily Progress Checklist providing a practical framework for implementation

Amabile and Kramer’s research is extensive, and the unique methodology includes detailed analysis of all 63,000 events mentioned in the 12,000 diary entries. “We had one overarching goal in conducting this research,” the authors explain. “We wanted to understand inner work life, the events influencing it, and its impact on people and their performance.” The research provides an unparalleled view into what really happens at work – including the positive actions of the best managers and the unwitting mistakes of the worst.

Every manager is faced with a dizzying array of choices each day on the job. THE PROGRESS PRINCIPLE offers a unique lens on ordering priorities so that managers can get the best out of their teams. Companies can supply great perks like chair massages, free meals, ping pong tables, and state-of-the-art gyms, but in the end great inner work life is about the work itself, not the accoutrements. The managers who understand the nuances of supporting progress will be the ones who enjoy the best inner work lives, along with their employees, and contribute most successfully to the long-term performance of their organizations.

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THE PROGRESS PRINCIPLE
Using Small Wins to Ignite Joy, Engagement, and Creativity at Work
Teresa Amabile and Steven Kramer
The Progress Principle – a Q&A with the authors
Teresa Amabile and Steven Kramer

What is your new book, THE PROGRESS PRINCIPLE, about? Please tell us what the Progress Principle is.

The book is about what makes people happy, motivated, creative and productive at work. It’s about employee engagement, how it influences performance, and how it is influenced by what happens at work. Take the first part of that question: What makes people happy and motivated? The answer is the progress principle: Of all the things that drive people and make them feel good about their work, the single most important is simply making progress in meaningful work.

While this may seem obvious, when we asked 669 managers around the world to choose among 5 managerial actions that can motivate people at work, they ranked “supporting progress” dead last. In fact, only 5% of the managers chose progress as most important. More importantly, in most of the 7 companies and 26 teams we studied, managers acted as if they did not understand this simple fact; they failed to consistently support progress.

In the book, you introduce the concept of “inner work life.” What is inner work life and how does it affect employee performance?

Inner work life is the constant stream of emotions, perceptions and motivations that people experience as they react to and make sense of the events in their work days.

In contrast to the common wisdom that pressure forms diamonds and that people must suffer to be creative, we found that people are most creative and productive when they have positive inner work lives – when they are happy, have positive perceptions of their work, their organization, and their colleagues, and when they are motivated by the work itself. We call this the inner work life effect, and it answers the second part of our basic research question: What makes people creative and productive at work?

Together, the progress principle and the inner work life effect give managers a powerful tool to increase performance and enhance the well-being of workers. The best way to enhance people’s feelings and motivations about work, and to boost their creative productivity, is to give them meaningful work and support them so they can make consistent progress in that work.

Why is the Progress Principle so important? How can understanding the effect progress has on employees affect a company’s bottom line?

The progress principle is critical to organizations for a number of reasons. First, progress enhances inner work life, which leads to higher levels of creativity, productivity, commitment to the work, and collegiality. All of these contribute to a company’s bottom line, as long as the company has a solid strategy. Second, people who feel good about their work and the people they work with are less likely to look elsewhere for work. As the economy picks up, and new jobs become available, it will become increasingly difficult for companies to retain their best people. How better to do that than to help them succeed? A final positive
side effect of the progress principle is that people are less likely to be sick when they are happy, so fewer hours will be lost to absenteeism.

Recently, other researchers have confirmed the importance of inner work life for a company’s bottom line. They found that employee satisfaction and perceptions of their work environment at one point in time predicted company performance at a later point in time: revenues, profitability, customer satisfaction, and employee retention.

**THE PROGRESS PRINCIPLE is based on years of research. How did you discover the Progress Principle? What did your research entail?**

In order to look deeply into people’s work lives, we decided to use an electronic daily diary form on which people could briefly record their experiences at work every day over a long period of time. Each diary form asked participants to describe one event that stood out in their mind that day – any event at all, as long as it was relevant to their work. We also asked them to rate a number of aspects of their inner work lives, including their emotions and motivation that day.

We chose project teams in which the work required creativity to be successful. Two hundred and thirty-eight professionals, in 26 project teams, in 7 companies, in 3 industries, agreed to participate in our study throughout the course of a particular project they were doing. We collected data over a number of years and, in the end, we had almost 12,000 dairy reports. These 12,000 daily reports have proved to be a treasure trove of data, enabling a number of discoveries, including the progress principle.

**Does every individual experience their inner work life in the same way? Does personality, age, sex, or personal life change the experience in any way?**

Of course, people differ in a number of ways that can affect their overall inner work lives. We wondered whether inner work life might act differently for different people. To test this we collected a variety of information about the participants in our study, including measures of personality, their educations, gender and age. We found that inner work life varied from day to day for everyone in our study and that the same kinds of events caused most people’s inner work lives to change in the same ways.

That said, we have only studied knowledge workers. These are professionals, and most of their work has some intrinsic value. Remember that the progress principle relies on having work that is meaningful. So, people who are doing work that they find meaningless will not be able to benefit fully from the sense of accomplishment that can accompany meaningful work.

**What is “meaningful work,” and why is it important for the progress principle?**

Meaningful work is any job or task that contributes to something the employee values. For example, the Google employees we have talked to find great meaning in Google’s mission “to organize the world’s information and make it universally accessible and useful.” But work doesn’t need such lofty goals in order to have meaning. As long as the person doing the work believes that it’s contributing to something important – like the team’s reputation for quality work, the organization’s viability, a customer need, a societal problem, or even the person’s own community or family – then any progress in that work is likely
to boost inner work life. But when people don’t understand or respect the work they’re doing, even “getting a lot done” is unlikely to make them feel very good.

**You’ve focused on progress as the key motivator in the workplace. What about negative events?**

Unfortunately, there is a dark side to the progress principle. Just as progress is the most important booster of inner work life, setbacks are the most important detractor. When people feel that they are stalled in their work, or actually moving backward, all three aspects of inner work life are affected negatively: perceptions, emotions and motivations. In fact, the negative impact of setbacks is 2-3 times stronger than the positive impact of progress.

This is a general effect, not limited just to setbacks versus progress. Psychologists have recently found a lot of evidence that “bad is stronger than good”. People pay more attention to, and react more strongly to, all sorts of negative stimuli. In our own study, we found that people tended to write longer diary entries about negative events than positive ones, suggesting that they were devoting more attention to the negative than the positive.

**Besides progress, does it take anything else to be happy and motivated at work?**

Although progress is the most important event supporting inner work life, it’s certainly not the only thing that matters. We discovered two other key types of work events, which we call catalysts and nourishers.

Catalysts are events that directly support progress in the work. They include (but are not limited to) providing clear goals and sufficient resources, allowing autonomy in the work, and offering needed help. Because catalysts support progress, they support inner work life indirectly – by increasing the probability that people will succeed and experience that wonderful sense of accomplishment. The opposite of catalysts are inhibitors. They block progress, and include such events as providing unclear or conflicting goals, and offering insufficient resources.

Interestingly, providing catalysts can also have a more direct effect on inner work life. This is because the mere act of providing support signals to people that they and their work are valued by the organization. As a result, they feel that their work has greater meaning and that they play an important role.

Nourishers are the everyday human connections that nearly everyone craves at work. Nourishers directly enhance inner work life, and they include encouragement, emotional support, respect, recognition, and camaraderie. Their opposites are toxins, which include disrespect, dismissiveness, and interpersonal conflict.

**What role does the corporate climate play in progress and inner work life? What about people who work from home or are solo-entrepreneurs?**

Corporate climate (or culture) plays a critical role because it spawns the events that can influence inner work life and support or undermine progress. Climate is the prevailing set of norms that shape the behavior and expectations of the people who work in the organization. Climate is an organization’s “signature” to people inside and outside the organization. It is created largely by the words and actions of
leaders, beginning with the organization's founders. Climate gives rise to specific everyday events that unfold within the organization; over time, similar specific events reinforce the climate.

Three main climate forces shape the Progress/Setback, Catalyst/Inhibitor, and Nourisher/Toxin events that occur inside an organization: consideration for people and their work, coordination across individuals, teams, and units, and communication about the work, the organization, and relevant external forces.

We haven’t yet studied people who work from home, or people who are solo entrepreneurs, but we believe that the basics of the progress principle and the inner work life effect apply to them, as well. Although the specific events influencing inner work life and progress are bound to be somewhat different across these settings, inner work life should still influence creativity and productivity, and progress (as well as setbacks) should still strongly influence inner work life.

**During the course of your research, were there any findings that surprised you? What does your research reveal that will surprise management level executives? Employees?**

The biggest surprise for us was that progress is the number one driver of inner work life, and we know that's news to managers, as well. Even though the progress principle can seem a bit obvious after the fact, few people realize that progress is so important. When we surveyed 669 managers from around the world, we found that **only 5%** ranked “supporting progress in the work” as the most important thing managers can do to increase employee motivation. Like most managers, we suspected that recognition and other kinds of human interaction would be more important.

The impact of inner work life on performance also seems to be a big surprise for managers. In particular, many managers don't realize how much creative productivity depends on intrinsic motivation – the drive that comes from enjoyment, satisfaction and personal challenge in the work itself.

Our data held three other surprises. First is the power of small events, such as “small wins” – seemingly minor steps forward in the work. Small wins, small losses, and many other minor events, both positive and negative, can have a significant influence on inner work life. In fact, 28% of all small events in our dataset had a big impact on inner work life. Managers need to understand that, although the things they say and do often seem minor, they can have a powerful effect on the inner work lives and performance of subordinates.

The power of negative events was also surprising. We would never have guessed that setbacks could have a negative effect on inner work life that is 2-3 times stronger than the positive effect of progress. We suspect that managers have no idea, either, or else they’d try a lot harder to eliminate the inhibitors, toxins, and other hassles that can lead to setbacks in the work and dampen inner work life.

Finally, the richness and importance of inner work life came as a surprise. We were stunned by the depth and emotionality of many diary entries, and by just how important people’s work was to them personally. Most of the people we studied were not merely working for a pay check. They cared deeply about their work, their colleagues, and the organizations they were part of. We were also surprised by how much inner work life varied from one day to the next, within the same person, triggered by the events unfolding at work.
How did you become interested in this area of study?

We are both psychologists, and the psychology of everyday work life is fascinating to us. At the time we began this research, Teresa had been studying creativity and innovation for over 20 years. She knew that intrinsic motivation was an important determinant of creativity, but did not know how other psychological states could impact creativity.

As she spent more time studying creative projects in companies, it became clear that emotions and perceptions were a big piece of the puzzle. So, along with Steve and a cadre of colleagues and research assistants, she decided to go after those other pieces and put them together.

In her previous experimental research, Teresa had found that she could affect intrinsic motivation and creativity by manipulating certain events, such as constraining people’s freedom approaching a task. She and Steve were particularly interested in how these dynamics would play out in real work settings. So we delved deeply into the everyday events within organizations that impact peoples’ inner work lives, and the ultimate effects on performance.

You are not only co-authors, but also husband and wife. Describe what it is like to write a book with your spouse.

To steal a line from Dickens, it was the best of times, it was the worst of times. But we would do it all again in a heartbeat. Sharing the excitement of discovery and bouncing ideas off each other strengthened our relationship tremendously. And writing a book together enhanced our own inner work lives. Having accomplished something as difficult as this together has allowed us to share a great sense of accomplishment in a way that would not have been possible if we had been working on our own separate projects.

Of course, there were hard times. As we say in the book, there is nothing easy about making progress. We did face many frustrations, and occasionally lost patience with each another. We also have different work styles, which sometimes caused tension. But those differences also reflected our complementary strengths; by working together, we accomplished more than either of us could have alone.

What’s next for Teresa Amabile and Steven Kramer?

Like most discoveries, the progress principle raises more questions than it answers. Currently, we are trying to learn how people can best harness the progress principle to enhance their own work and inner work lives. One thing that we think has real potential for improving inner work life is daily journaling. We believe that, if people can learn to pay attention to and celebrate the small wins they achieve every day, and plan ways to make progress more likely, they can improve their lives and their work tremendously.

We are also planning research on how managers might use a simple checklist to help them focus on the daily progress, setbacks, supports, and inhibitors experienced by their subordinates. In his book, The Checklist Manifesto, Atul Gawande describes how a simple checklist can dramatically improve the outcomes of surgery. In our book, we describe a Daily Progress Checklist for managers, in the belief that it can do for management what Gawande’s checklist has done for surgery.
We have also begun to look more deeply into how specific catalysts and inhibitors operate inside organization. For example, one study is looking at helping behaviors directed toward creative teams.

Finally, we are very interested in researching inner work life in other settings. For instance, how does it operate in people who primarily work alone (like artists or independent consultants), or for people who telecommute or otherwise work with other people only virtually?
Employee engagement is in severe crisis. Battered by fears of job loss and stressed by overwork during the recession and its aftermath, talented workers across industries have become apathetic toward their jobs and eager to leave for greener pastures as opportunities arise. A 2010 survey showed employee morale at its lowest level in the 15 years the survey had been taken. No longer the sole responsibility of HR managers, employee engagement has become an overriding concern of top executives. Yet our research reveals that 95% of managers fundamentally misunderstand what motivates people inside organizations. The most important motivator is making progress on meaningful work; this is the progress principle. Drawing on analyses of nearly 12,000 daily diaries submitted by knowledge workers, we discovered the progress principle and its implications for the performance of individuals, teams, and organizations. A daily discipline of focusing on employees’ specific project needs can help managers leverage the power of progress – even “small wins” – for sustaining employee engagement in the work.

Managing innovation is one of the most important and least developed skills of most leaders. Yet few contemporary organizations can survive without continuous innovation – the successful implementation of creative ideas coming from within and outside the firm. A prime reason for the dearth of effective innovation management is leaders’ fundamental lack of awareness of the day-by-day struggles and triumphs experienced by knowledge workers trying to develop and implement new, useful ideas every day. This article opens a window on those experiences, drawing on the stories of two teams of professionals working on new product development, new process development, and other business problems that required significant creativity and innovation. It details seven specific everyday events inside organizations, across industries, that can significantly affect innovation workers’ subjective experience, daily performance, and ultimate contributions to organizational success.

People at work are powerfully influenced by emotions every day – but these emotions are safely hidden from managers most of the time. Our research revealed what sparks emotional reactions, what the consequences are, and how both employees and managers can use this knowledge. With access to over 200 employees’ private thoughts, feelings, and drives through confidential daily reports, we saw the intense emotional experiences – both positive and negative – that can boost or cripple people’s creativity, productivity, commitment to the work, and contributions to team cohesion. We illustrate these processes through the stories of two teams. In the Nexus team, a top manager’s mishandling of team assignments and a team
leader’s inability to shape team dynamics led to explosive conflict that soured emotions and stalled the team’s work. By contrast, in the Infomap team, the team leaders’ consistent provision of supports for people and their work led to extremely positive emotional experiences – even on some days that were objectively fraught with difficulty. For the members of both teams, emotional experiences intertwined with perceptions of events to influence motivation for the work. This article draws on concepts of emotional intelligence, but goes far beyond those concepts, to draw a detailed picture of the emotional landscape of organizations and what leaders can do to improve it.

Four Reasons to Keep a Work Diary (pp. 183-192)

Many well-known figures throughout history, from John Adams to Andy Warhol, have faithfully kept records of their daily lives. Aside from the outside shot at historical immortality, we can all count on real benefits from keeping a diary. In particular, there are four reasons for both managers and employees to keep a work diary: (1) focus; (2) patience; (3) planning; and (4) personal growth. Illustrated with quotes from our research participants, this article reveals why journaling can yield surprising benefits and suggests techniques for starting, maintaining, and effectively using a work diary.

Negativity Traps (pp. 92-93)

In their power to capture attention, impact emotion, and influence behavior, negative events are more powerful than positive ones. Our research analyzed the everyday psychological experiences and performance of dozens of knowledge workers inside organizations. In the process, we discovered – quite by accident – that setbacks in the work have a disproportionately negative impact on emotions, perceptions, and motivation, compared to the positive impact wielded by positive events like making progress. These findings are reinforced by recent psychological discoveries that, in general, “bad is stronger than good.” In earlier experiments, we found that more harshly negative critiques of products or ideas are used to bolster one’s intellectual image and are, in fact, perceived as more intelligent (if nastier); other researchers later discovered that such negative critiques are remembered more vividly than positive ones. In this article, we describe the possible value of the outsize impact of negativity, but we also explore its traps – for individuals, groups, and organizations.

What Really Happens at Work

Although most high-level leaders were once lower-level employees, there are many forces making it is easy for leaders to forget – or ignore – what life is really like for most employees inside their organizations. Even most people “in the trenches” are unaware of the extent to which their own experiences are unique or common. Contrary to conventional wisdom that work is “not personal, it’s business” – a view famously expressed by the Tom Hanks character in the film “You’ve Got Mail” – our research found that work is, in fact, very personal for most people. The 12,000 daily diaries we collected from 238 people in 26 project teams in 7 companies in 3 industries gave us an unprecedented database of information about what really happens at work. In this article, we present interesting – and surprising – facts about work life.
More fundamentally, we highlight the richness and personal significance of each individual’s inner work life: the perceptions, emotions, and motivations that the person experiences while reacting to and making sense of events in the work day.