



Inside the Mind at Work: Manage for Progress

“So much of what we call management consists of making it difficult for people to do work.” ~ Peter Drucker

As any fan of *The Office* can attest, negative managerial behavior severely affects employees' work lives.

Managers' day-to-day and moment-to-moment actions also create a ripple effect, directly facilitating or impeding the organization's ability to function.

The best managers recognize their power to influence and strive to build teams with great inner work lives.

In *The Progress Principle: Using Small Wins to Ignite Joy, Engagement, and Creativity at Work* (Harvard Business Press, 2011), Teresa Amabile and Steven Kramer describe how people with great inner work lives have:

- Consistently positive emotions
- Strong motivation
- Favorable perceptions of the organization, their work and their colleagues

What matters most is forward momentum in meaningful work – in a word, *progress*. Managers who recognize the need for even small wins set the stage for high performance.

But surveys of CEOs and project leaders reveal that 95 percent fundamentally misunderstand the need for this critical motivator.

What Really Motivates Us?

If you lead knowledge workers, you likely employ these conventional management practices:

- Recruit the best talent.
- Provide appropriate incentives.
- Give stretch assignments to develop talent.
- Use emotional intelligence to connect with each individual.

A Message from Nancy...

I have a couple of questions to ask you:

1. Is your business as successful as you think it should be?
2. Are you and your team able to pinpoint the solutions necessary to create positive changes to get where you need to go?



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- Review performance carefully.

Unfortunately, you may miss the most fundamental source of leverage: managing for progress. Recognizing even the smallest win has a more powerful impact than virtually anything else. In a survey by Amabile and Kramer, 669 managers ranked five factors that could influence motivation and emotions at work:

1. Recognition
2. Incentives
3. Interpersonal support
4. Clear goals
5. Support for making progress in the work

Managers incorrectly ranked “support for making progress” dead last, with most citing “recognition for good work” as the most important motivator.

Your ability to focus on progress is paramount. Video-game designers excel at this mission, hooking players on the steady pace of progress bars.

Facilitating Progress

When you focus on small wins and facilitate progress, your employees will find the energy and drive required to perform optimally.

Two key forces enable progress:

1. **Catalysts** – Events that directly advance project work, such as:
 - a. Clear goals
 - b. Autonomy
 - c. Resources, including time
 - d. Reviewing lessons from errors and success
 - e. Free flow of ideas
2. **Nourishers** – Interpersonal events that uplift workers,

including:

- a. Encouragement and support
- b. Demonstrations of respect
- c. Collegiality

Dealing with Setbacks

Three events undermine people’s inner work lives:

1. **Setbacks** – The biggest downer, yet inevitable in any sort of meaningful work
2. **Inhibitors** – Events that directly hinder project work
3. **Toxins** – Interpersonal events that undermine the people doing the work

Negative events carry a greater impact than positive ones. We pay more attention to them, remember them, and spend more time thinking and talking about them.

That’s why it’s so important for managers and team leaders to counteract negative events with positive perceptions and comments. Research shows it takes three positive messages to balance a negative one.

The Daily Progress Checklist

To better manage your people, use the Daily Progress Checklist (below) to review today’s and plan tomorrow’s managerial actions. After a few days of checklist use, you’ll be able to save time by scanning for the italicized words:

1. Focus first on the day’s *progress* and *setbacks*.
2. Next, think about specific events: the *catalysts* and *nourishers* that affected progress.
3. Finally, prepare for *action*: What’s the one step you can take to best facilitate progress?

The Daily Progress Checklist (T. Amabile, S. Kramer, <i>The Progress Principle</i>)	
Progress	Setbacks
Which 1 or 2 events today indicated either a small win or a possible breakthrough? (Describe briefly.)	Which 1 or 2 events today indicated either a small setback or a possible crisis? (Describe briefly.)
Catalysts	Inhibitors
Did the team have clear short- and long-term <i>goals</i> for meaningful work?	Was there any confusion regarding long- or short-term <i>goals</i> for meaningful work?
Did team members have sufficient <i>autonomy</i> to solve problems and take ownership of the project?	Were team members overly constrained in their ability to solve problems and feel <i>ownership</i> of the project?
Did they have all the <i>resources</i> they needed to move forward efficiently?	Did they lack any of the <i>resources</i> they needed to move forward effectively?

Did they have sufficient <i>time</i> to focus on meaningful work?	Did they lack sufficient <i>time</i> to focus on meaningful work?
Did they have all the <i>resources</i> they needed to move forward efficiently?	Did they lack any of the <i>resources</i> they needed to move forward effectively?
Did I give or get them <i>help</i> when they needed or requested it? Did I encourage team members to help one another?	Did I or others fail to provide needed or requested <i>help</i> ?
Did I discuss <i>lessons</i> from today's successes and problems with my team?	Did I "punish" failure, or neglect to find <i>lessons</i> and/or opportunities in problems and successes?
Did I help <i>ideas</i> flow freely within the group?	Did I or others cut off the presentation or debate of <i>ideas</i> prematurely?
Nourishers	Toxins
Did I show <i>respect</i> to team members by recognizing their contributions to progress, attending to their ideas and treating them as trusted professionals?	Did I <i>disrespect</i> any team members by failing to recognize their contributions to progress, not attending to their ideas or not treating them as trusted professionals?
Did I <i>encourage</i> team members who faced difficult challenges?	Did I <i>discourage</i> a member of the team in any way?
Did I <i>support</i> team members who had a personal or professional problem?	Did I <i>neglect</i> a team member who had a personal or professional problem?
Is there a sense of personal and professional affiliation and <i>camaraderie</i> within the team?	Is there <i>tension</i> or antagonism among members of the team or between team members and me?
Inner Work Life	
Did I see any indications of the quality of my subordinates' <i>inner work lives</i> today?	
<i>Perceptions</i> of the work, team, management, firm?	
<i>Emotions</i> ?	
<i>Motivation</i> ?	
What specific <i>events</i> might have affected inner work life today?	
Action Plan	
What can I do tomorrow to strengthen the <i>catalysts</i> and <i>nourishers</i> identified and provide ones that are lacking?	What can I do tomorrow to start eliminating the <i>inhibitors</i> and <i>toxins</i> identified?
Source: T. Amabile & S. Kramer, <i>The Progress Principle: Using Small Wins to Ignite Joy, Engagement, and Creativity at Work</i> (Harvard Business Press, 2011)	

Discover Your Inner Work Life

Management responsibilities can take a toll on day-by-day perceptions, emotions and motivations. Most managers are both superiors and subordinates, with limited power in some circumstances.

Recognizing small wins is the best way to motivate your team – the key principle revealed through rigorous analysis of daily journal entries by Amabile and Kramer.

Every day events affect our inner work lives, and managers are certainly not exempt. As a leader, you must tend to your staff's inner work lives by providing support each day. You, too, will perform best when your inner work life is positive and strong.

Be sure to use the *Daily Progress Checklist* to review the day's events and how much you've accomplished – no matter how difficult or disappointing. Even if gains seem relatively miniscule, you'll benefit from an honest assessment. Remember: Setbacks are inevitable, but they serve as learning opportunities.

Progress triggers a positive inner work life. To boost yours, focus on providing your people with catalysts and nourishers. Buffer them, as much as possible, from inhibitors and toxins. This sets the stage for progress in your managerial work, as well as a positive progress loop.



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