How Small Wins Unleash Creativity

by Carmen Nobel

In their new book, *The Progress Principle: Using Small Wins to Ignite Joy, Engagement, and Creativity at Work*, authors Teresa M. Amabile and Steven J. Kramer discuss how even seemingly small steps forward on a project can make huge differences in employees' emotional and intellectual well-being. Amabile talks about the main findings of the book. Plus: book excerpt. Key concepts include:

- Of all the factors that induce creativity, productivity, collegiality, and commitment among employees, the single most important one is a sense of making progress on meaningful work.
- Seemingly small signs of progress will induce huge positive effects on employees' psyches. On the other hand, seemingly small setbacks will induce huge negative effects.
- The catalysts that induce progress include setting clear goals; allowing autonomy; providing resources; giving enough time—but not too much; offering help with the work; learning from both problems and successes; and allowing ideas to flow.

According to recent research, the single most important factor is simply a sense of making progress on meaningful work. But creating an environment that fosters progress takes some careful effort.

In their new book, *The Progress Principle: Using Small Wins to Ignite Joy, Engagement, and Creativity at Work*, authors Teresa M. Amabile and Steven J. Kramer discuss how even seemingly humdrum events can make huge differences in employees' emotional and intellectual well-being.

"There's no reason, no matter how resource-constrained an organization is, why managers can't help employees see the meaning in their work," says Amabile, a professor in the Entrepreneurial Management Unit at Harvard Business School. (Kramer, a developmental psychologist, is her husband.)

To prepare for the book, Amabile and Kramer collected confidential, personal stories from 238 white-collar employees at seven companies in a variety of industries. Each worker kept a daily diary during the course of a project, answering open-ended questions such as, "Briefly describe one event from today that stands out in your mind."

Each diary lasted the length of the project—sometimes as long as nine months. The researchers then analyzed the data, totaling some 12,000 daily diaries, looking for commonalities that influenced "inner work life," which the book defines as "the confluence of perceptions, emotions, and motivations that individuals experience as they react to and make sense of the events of their workday." Tangible incentives—salaries and bonuses—barely registered in the diaries. But the subject of progress, or lack thereof, loomed large. More importantly, diary entries that reported work progress often showed an inner work life surge, which, in turn, increased the likelihood of creative productivity.

"We found that of all the events that characterized the best inner work life days, by far the most prominent was making progress," Amabile says. "And of all the events that characterized the worst days, by far the most prominent was setbacks—feeling like you've lost ground on a project. As a pair, progress and setbacks are the main differentiators of the best and worst days."

**Small Wins**

Unfortunately, the researchers found that the negative effect of setbacks was more powerful than the positive effect of progress on employees' psyches. In fact, the effect of setbacks was two to three times stronger.

"That's a common finding in psychology—that negative events and negative things tend to get people's attention more and tend to have a stronger impact on people's feelings," Amabile explains.

But fortunately, seemingly minor victories turned out to be nearly as effective as major breakthroughs when it came to enhancing employees' inner work lives and, therefore, inducing their passion and creativity. The book refers to these as "small wins."

"We found that 28 percent of small events of all kinds had a major impact on inner work life," Amabile says. "This is good news! Big breakthroughs at work are really rare. But small wins are something people can experience pretty regularly if the work is chunked down to manageable pieces. This suggests that you really do have to sweat the small stuff."

**Catalysts And Nourishers**
And not only did managers get the wrong answer on our survey. In the companies we studied, far too many managers acted as if they didn't understand the value of progress in their workplace. Recognition did boost inner work life, when it showed up in our diary study. But it wasn't nearly as prominent as progress. Besides, without progress, people feel unsupported and disconnected from their work. Instead, overall, these managers ranked “recognition for good work (either public or private)” as the most important factor in motivating workers and making them happy. Recognition certainly did boost inner work life, when it showed up in our diary study. But it wasn't nearly as prominent as progress.

But no. The results revealed unawareness of the power of progress, across all levels of management. Support for making progress was ranked dead last as a factor in motivating employees. We have asked dozens of managers, individually and in groups, to name their most important levers for motivating employees. They tend to favor the things that most management books tout: recognition, tangible incentives, and clear work goals. When we asked how they, as managers, might influence employee motivation and emotions at work, they explicitly included the progress principle.

How can you keep employees truly engaged in the work they are doing? We found that the single most important thing you can do is to help them make progress in work they perceive as valuable. This is the progress principle.

You might think it is obvious that managers should focus on supporting employees’ work progress. It is not. Here’s a startling fact: if managers don’t understand the value of progress, it won’t even be in the picture. We have asked dozens of managers, individually and in groups, to name their most important levers for motivating employees. They tend to favor the things that most management books tout: recognition, tangible incentives, and clear work goals. When we asked how they, as managers, might influence employee emotions, the list looks the same, although many add interpersonal support. Rarely—very rarely—does anyone mention progress in the workplace and how managers should support it. A 2009 McKinsey survey on motivating people at work yielded the same story—progress was completely absent from the results.

In other words, if we had a group of managers draw a bar graph depicting what they think the key three influences on inner work life are, progress would be dead last. We have asked dozens of managers, individually and in groups, to name their most important levers for motivating employees. They tend to favor the things that most management books tout: recognition, tangible incentives, and clear work goals. When we asked how they, as managers, might influence employee motivation and emotions at work, they explicitly included the progress principle.

And it's worth it.
As for our personal life, so for the organisation—proper, crystallised and workable/achievable goal setting is the most important starter. Yes, some changes, here and there, may have to be effected as we proceed but

Within the organization or team. Where there is no meaning there is no purpose, and where there is no purpose there is no motivation. We can even paraphrase Ben Franklin “For the want of a meaning...everything is

“There’s no reason...why managers can’t help employees see the meaning in their work” seems to be the very essence of the issue—and the main purpose of management or leadership is the creation of meaning. Interesting item—thank you.

Ensuring clear and consistent goals is only one way that managers can support daily progress and infuse the work with meaning for their employees. We discovered several—none of them surprising or exotic—but all of them crucial for employee engagement and long-term performance.

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It is on the observation that negative events leave a longlasting impact on human psyche that I wish to share my experiences. As a teacher, trainer and consultant in management I had on several occasions administered the exercise, ‘The most memorable incident in (earliest of) my life’ to the students, participants in programmes, professionals and persons from almost all walks of life. Running into several hundreds so far, by far the most important memories these people carry from their past are one of unpleasantness and sadness. On probing as to why ‘you remember the sad event more’, several answers were proferred. The answer which I remember most was from a student, who said, ‘Sir, we remember unpleasant events more, since we want to forget them most!’

Whether remembering sad events more is ‘unfortunate’, as was suggested, is however debatable. Taken in a right and positive spirit, such events may enable the person concerned emerge different and better in (his/her) future career and life.

P.Rao.

I was a software engineer at a high-tech company. Found out that there is a strong possibility that the project may not be going forward, due to a shift in the client’s agenda. Therefore, there is a strong

Besides impeding progress, shifting goals can also drain work of its meaning. When people feel that their hard work will not amount to anything, they come to feel that they are wasting their time, and that their work is without value.

And the next day, this same product manager wrote the following:

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Meanwhile, my team leader came to me with an idea to use the new soft-grip handle in lower retail. Steve [our team leader] waffles back and forth. [ ... ] Very frustrating project, getting little support from Corporate, management team, or key team members [ ... ]. Yet, all agree that the competitive situation is becoming desperate [ ... ]. I have prepared yet another proposal to show the management team tomorrow, but I need to get Steve to buy in; not sure which way he will go. [Sophie, product manager at a consumer products company, 4/26]

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I totally agree that small wins enhance creativity in organizational and other set ups were such ingenuity is required. How? We may all be aware that creativity is a phenomenon of a person or a group of persons (human beings), not machines, to create something new which can either be a product, service or solution. A ‘person’ being the center of creativity, implies that the dynamism factor in creativity is at its peak. Managing dynamism of persons therefore becomes cardinal if one wishes to get the best imagination from a person or a group of persons. In managing persons, structuring work in a manner that brings about a sense of satisfactions, achievement and ownership to the human being (worker) involved, is certainly a good strategy of igniting and maintaining ingenuity in individuals. The feeling of satisfaction, achievement and ownership enhances the desire by worker to do more of such, thus bring about continued ze

PAUL NICHOLAS DIRECTOR, SOUL-CHAPLAIN CONSULTANCY

Appreciating the efforts and providing the necessary resources for people makes such a positive difference.

Thanks.

G.P.Rao.

Today, the VP of R&D tried to wipe out quite a bit of work we’ve done [ ... ] he wants it another way because “he said so.” [He] is like a steamroller—he wants his way and doesn’t want to listen to anybody else. It is so frustrating!! Why pretend to give us autonomy if you’re just going to make everything be done your way anyway?? [Designer at a consumer products company]

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Goals can shift for many reasons, but the consequences for inner work life are almost always negative. For instance, managers often fail to realize the damage that will be done to employee engagement if they neglect proper customer management.

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As for our personal life, so for the organisation—proper, crystallised and workable/achievable goal setting is the most important starter. Yes, some changes, here and there, may have to be effected as we proceed but
the basic goal has to remain as it was contemplated. The next success factor is the time management and aim to hit the deadline. Till the closing stage, monitoring progress regularly leads to ensuring we are on track.

During the span of performance, various wins, even small ones, need to be acknowledged for the creativity of the achiever.

It is indeed painfully observed that people are hit more by the shocks of failures rather than by the pleasure of successes. Mostly the managers are keen to reprimand their juniors for even nominal setbacks but not, at the same time, patting the good work done. Negative impact of such actions is obvious.

I also have been taking for granted “progress” as a catalyst and nourisher and never mentioned it specifically as such while speaking of the success factors. ‘The Progress Principle’ is a great concept and has been noted with a sense of appreciation.

Interesting read... Have been a manager long enough. The survey shows something different than what I would have thought on the effect of progress being acknowledged as a very significant factor in motivation.

Assigning employees with "work they perceive as valuable" is spot on as a management tool. Not always easy where the press of work and assignments is at full speed. the ability of a manager to also focus on innovation will help employees as well.

Creating and ensuring the meaningful work factor requires a whole new type of leadership competency. I’d liken it to an advanced form of EQ where empathy is elevated. You not only have to “see” the vision for the work, but be able to communicate it early and often in a way that emotes for others. That’s a real talent! Those type of conversations will define the truly great leaders of the future.

Where as work must be valuable, personal views need to be respected too. It is when my voice is valued that I feel highly motivated. Such a small action like listening to me help me go an extra mile by putting in extra hours towards achievement of the most desired result. In such circumstances one loses the control over the project and focusses on the output regardless of its quality. I have heard comments like; “who is the other's Boss?” from a lines manager during feed back meetings in persuit of expressing my autonomous innovative approach to a task. Such a reaction does not only stall the project; it makes one lose trust in the whole organisation. The Progress Principle.
Learn how to leverage the power of small wins to motivate yourself to reach your goals. The efforts of tracking small achievements every day enhanced the workers motivation (2). Amabile explains that the practice of recording our progress helps us appreciate our small wins which in turn boosts our sense of confidence. We can then leverage that competence toward future, larger successes. This is because any accomplishment, no matter how small, activates the reward circuitry of our brains. When this pathway is opened some key chemicals are released that give us a feeling of achievement and pride. In particular, the neurotransmitter dopamine is released which energizes us and gives

Using Small Wins to Ignite Joy, Engagement, and Creativity at Work. - Author: Teresa M. Amabile and Steven J. Kramer.

Setting clear goals. Allowing autonomy. Providing resources. Giving enough time—but not too much—to complete a project. Creativity is limitless. Creativity can go beyond imagination. You can gain more knowledge and more benefit in every work that you do once your creativity comes into the picture. Creativity is the use of imagination or original ideas to create something. You innovate, you invent, you create, you build and you do a lot more with your creativity. You may also like Be Creative and Unleash the True Potential Within YOU! You are powerful and you are about to win. Go ahead. I hope you like the article.