

At a DISTANCE

BY MICHAEL BRENNER

As anyone who has ever tried to manage a remote team knows, keeping members productive and engaged brings a unique set of challenges. But sustaining a collaborative, energized, high-performance remote team isn't magic. It's entirely possible by understanding and implementing a few critical principles of human psychology that apply to conventional teams and making a few adjustments where necessary.

A detailed research study of engagement and performance led by my colleagues Teresa Amabile, director of research at the Harvard Business School, and Steven Kramer provides a helpful path. Their findings—published in the book *The Progress Principle: Using Small Wins to Ignite Joy, Engagement, and Creativity at Work*—illuminate the key factors that drive workplace engagement and performance.

Managing a remote team? Here's how to get (and keep) them engaged.





Amabile and Kramer employed a daily diary form to extract the feelings, thoughts, and perceptions of the study's participants. At the end of each day, participants completed the confidential form and emailed it to the researchers (in all, they received almost 12,000 daily diary entries). Once the diaries were analyzed and the qualitative and quantitative data compared (a process that took several years), seven intriguing discoveries about people and their work emerged.

- Inner work life drives performance.
- Progress drives inner work life.
- Work must be meaningful.
- Small wins matter.
- Catalysts facilitate the work itself.
- Nourishers build human connection.
- Managers make the biggest difference.

For managers, understanding these seven key principles is essential for building and sustaining any productive, highly engaged team.

Inner work life drives performance

Any team's performance is influenced by each member's subjective (and largely private assessment) of what is going on "beneath the surface" of their experience at work. This is what Amabile and Kramer call our "inner work life"—the confluence of perceptions, emotions, and motivations each of us faces as we experience, make sense of, and react to the events of our workday.

What's important to remember about inner work life is that it drives performance. The re-

searchers call this the "inner work life effect." Their study shows that when the three components of inner work life are positive, people are more creative, productive, committed, and collegial. In short, they are more engaged.

Of course, the opposite is true when inner work life is sour. When managers understand the strong link between inner work life and performance, they can begin to influence the relationship in a positive way.

Progress drives inner work life

If inner work life drives performance, what drives inner work life? Amabile and Kramer examined this question by contrasting participants' best days with their worst days as indicated by their diary entries. They found that of all the factors that can boost people's inner work life on a given day, the most significant by far was making progress on meaningful work. This is the progress principle.

Why progress? Making progress feeds what I call the 3 Cs of self-worth: competence, confidence, and capability. When we make progress, we feel good about ourselves. Our self-confidence grows and we get even more revved up to handle the next challenge. We feel proficient and accomplished.

When we fail to make progress, however, we feel enervated and demoralized. We may even give up altogether. Making progress is so strong a motivator that it overshadowed all other events that occurred on people's best days.

Work must be meaningful

Making regular progress is essential to positive inner work life and, consequently, to performance and results. But that's only part of the puzzle. For the progress principle to have an impact on engagement, the work also must be meaningful.

All jobs have meaning, of course, even if that meaning is not readily obvious. For work to be meaningful, the employee must perceive it as contributing value to someone or something that matters. That "someone or something" could be the customer, the team, the organization, or the community.

What matters is that employees see and



know how their daily work is making a difference. Managers can boost engagement significantly by helping their people make the connection between their work and its meaning.

Small wins matter

One of the biggest discoveries to emerge from the research was the power of small wins—the little victories or moments of progress that can slip under the radar without acknowledgment. Celebrating small wins can boost inner work life dramatically.

On the flip side, small losses, or setbacks, can have an extremely negative effect on inner work life. The research shows that the power of setbacks to diminish happiness is more than twice as strong as the power of progress to boost happiness.

It's unreasonable to suggest that employees will never experience setbacks; they're an inevitable part of work life. But managers should do everything within their ability to minimize the daily obstacles and hindrances that can hurt inner work life. Because when it comes to inner work life, little things really do matter.

Catalysts facilitate the work itself

Catalysts are second only to progress as a positive influence on inner work life. According to Amabile and Kramer, a catalyst is “anything that directly facilitates the timely, creative, high-quality completion of the work.” The research uncovered seven key catalysts to which managers should pay special attention:

- setting clear goals
- allowing autonomy
- providing resources
- giving enough time (but not too much)
- helping with the work
- learning from problems and successes
- allowing ideas to flow.

Just as catalysts elevate inner work life, inhibitors degrade it. Inhibitors describe both the absence of and negative forms of catalysts (for example, withholding information, micro-managing, or avoiding problems).

Because catalysts facilitate progress, which

MANAGERS CAN BOOST ENGAGEMENT SIGNIFICANTLY BY HELPING THEIR PEOPLE MAKE THE CONNECTION BETWEEN THEIR WORK AND ITS MEANING.

is the number one driver of engagement, they're critical to building and sustaining a high-performance culture. Even in this time of severe economic uncertainty, managers can provide catalysts in the form of clear goals, assistance, and autonomy.

Nourishers build human connection

Nourishers are interpersonal triggers that provide emotional support. They strengthen collaboration and rapport among team members. The research uncovered four major nourishers to which managers should pay special attention:

- respect and recognition
- encouragement
- emotional support (empathy)
- affiliation.

Toxins are the opposite of nourishers. They include disrespect, discouragement, emotional neglect, and antagonism. Managers know this, of course. What they may not know is the extent to which these toxins can negatively affect inner work life and, consequently, engagement and performance. Managers who dismiss nourishers as “warm and fuzzy” do so at their own peril.

Managers make the biggest difference

The “direct leader link,” which is the relationship between manager and employee, is where engagement is either won or lost. When managers, through their behaviors and attitude, set in motion a “progress loop”—with prog-

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ress feeding inner work life and inner work life feeding progress—great things happen.

The best way for a manager to initiate a progress loop on his team is to ask every morning: “What can I do today to help facilitate progress and remove obstacles?” Then remain vigilant to both big and small factors that can boost or ruin someone’s day.

More than any senior executive in the C-suite, direct managers make the difference through the quality of their daily interactions with their people.

Implications for remote teams

What can we take away from the research and apply to remote teams? Here are some ideas that align with the progress principle.

Get people together physically occasionally.

The camaraderie and rapport that develops when colleagues are together physically is difficult to reproduce virtually.

If possible, get distant team members together at least twice a year for an offsite meeting or retreat. The time spent together will be well worth the expense.

Leverage video technology. It’s easy for people to disengage when a disembodied voice is on the other end of a phone line. Email is even worse.

Since video conferencing allows team members to see one another and react to visual cues, a far greater sense of affiliation and connection is generated.

Check in regularly (but don’t micromanage).

When you check in with your people, don’t do it in a way that feels like parenting (“Is your homework done?”). Rather, ask if anything is preventing progress: a lack of resources or time,

unclear goals, or constraints, for example.

If you can mitigate the obstacle, do so. If you can’t, be sure the employee knows why. A reasonable explanation can go a long way.

Nourish inner work life. Ask about the work, but also ask how people are holding up mentally, physically, and emotionally.

You don’t need to probe their private lives. Just show that their inner work life matters to you and that you’re available to listen, make suggestions, and provide support.

Establish common protocols and practices for communicating. Confusion over where to store electronic documents or when to schedule phone calls is a major inhibitor. Make sure you establish conventions (solicit your team members’ ideas!) and make everyone aware of them.

Celebrate small wins. Just because your team is remote doesn’t mean the power of small wins doesn’t apply. When a team member (or subgroup) makes progress, be sure to acknowledge it. The boost to their inner work life will be significant.

Continually stress the meaning of the work.

Team members working remotely can feel isolated and disconnected from the team’s purpose. Let them know regularly how important their work is and how much the end user depends on them.

When it is clear to employees that their efforts matter, the table is set for positive inner work life to rule.

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