The Progress Principle:
Optimizing Inner Work Life to Create Value

In our highly-connected environment, it's easy to forget
how important 'inner work life' is to organizational progress:
when one goes downhill, so does the other.

by **Teresa Amabile** and **Steven Kramer**

IN 2008, GOOGLE ACCOMPLISHED A RARE FEAT: perched in the lofty ranks of *Fortune* magazine's 'five most admired companies in America', it also ranked among the top five of the magazine's 'best companies to work for'.

Media accounts made the 10-year-old Internet powerhouse seem like an employees' paradise – albeit one that relied on fabulous wealth: world-class chefs served up three free meals a day in several distinct cafes spread across the two dozen buildings of the Google campus; hourly shuttles with Wi-Fi access transported employees, free of charge, between Mountain View and San Francisco; ping-pong games enlivened work days and dogs tagged by their owners' sides.

How could other companies possibly aspire to this double nirvana of business success and employee delight? Our research shows how, and it has nothing to do with free food or athletic facilities. The secret lies in creating the conditions for great *inner work life*: conditions that foster positive emotions, strong motivation and favourable perceptions of colleagues and the work itself.

We recently took a deep dive inside seven companies, tracking the day-to-day events that moved the inner work lives of their people. What we found is that as inner work life goes, so goes the company: people are more creative and productive when they are deeply engaged in their work, when they feel happy, and when they think highly of their co-workers, managers and organizations.

But there's more: when people enjoy consistently-positive inner work lives, they are also more committed to their work and more likely to work well with colleagues. In other words, work-related psychological benefits translate into performance benefits for the organization. In this article we will define inner work life and describe the three key forces that optimize it.

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The Dynamics of Inner Work Life

Inner work life is the constant stream of emotions, perceptions and motivations that people experience as they react to and make sense of events in their work day. Inner work life is *inner* because it goes on inside of each person. Although it is central to one's experience of the workday, it is usually imperceptible to others and can go unexamined even by the individual experiencing it. That's because most organizations have unwritten rules against showing strong emotions or expressing strong opinions – especially if they are negative or contrary to prevailing views. Let's examine each element of inner work life in turn.

Emotions: Emotions are both sharply-defined reactions and more general feelings, like good and bad moods. This includes the joy you feel when you finally solve a difficult problem; your disappointment when the board rejects your strategic plan; and your pride when a fellow manager recognizes your creativity at a meeting. Emotion is also the overall positive mood you feel when everything seems to be going well on a particular day, or the negative mood when a day starts with a setback and goes downhill from there. Emotions vary along two key dimensions: degree of *pleasantness* and degree of *intensity*: you can be mildly annoyed by a brief outage of the corporate intranet or enraged by a flippant response to a new idea you floated in a management meeting. While both are unpleasant emotions, the latter is much more unpleasant *and* much more intense.

Perceptions: Perceptions can range from immediate impressions to fully-developed theories about what is happening and what it 'means'. When something happens that grabs your attention at work, you start *sensemaking* – trying to figure it out. Your mind poses a series of questions, especially if what happened was ambiguous or unexpected, and the answers form your perceptions. Usually you are unaware of this process; for example, if upper management cancels your team's project without warning or explanation, the following questions might bubble up unconsciously: are my teammates incompetent? Am I? Does the work I do have any real value?

Motivations: Motivation is a combination of a person's choice to do some task, their desire to expend effort doing it, and their drive to persist with that effort. Many possible sources of motivation exist, but three are most relevant to work life:
  • *Extrinsic* motivation – the motivation to do something in

order to get something else – drives most of us in our work to some degree. Examples include your motivation to take a position because the pay and benefits can't be beat or to do whatever it takes to win an industry award.

  • *Intrinsic* motivation emerges from a love of the work itself – wanting to do the work well because it is interesting, satisfying, engaging or personally challenging. Such deep *engagement* in work can drive people to surprising displays of seemingly unrewarded effort. Witness the phenomenon of open-source programming innovation, in which thousands of programmers collaborate online to create and improve computing platforms – with absolutely no tangible compensation.

  • *Relational* or *altruistic* motivation arises from the need to connect with and help others. The camaraderie that comes from collaborating with enjoyable colleagues can drive us in our work, and so can the belief that our work has real value to a person, a group or society at large. Altruistic motivation can be fairly general ("My work helps people with Type 1 diabetes,") or quite specific ("My research could lead to a treatment for my diabetic child"). Usually, the reason behind relational motivation isn't nearly as compelling as treating a disease – but even less dramatic reasons can be forceful ("My collaboration helps this struggling junior designer.")

These different forms of motivation can coexist in the same person, at the same time. In fact, nearly all intrinsically-motivated tasks on the job have some extrinsic motivators attached. For example, you can be intrinsically motivated by the challenge of creating a marketing strategy for a new service, while still driven by next week's deadline for presenting the strategy to the board – an extrinsic motivator.

Most people have strong intrinsic motivation to do their work, at least early in their careers, and that motivation continues until something gets in the way. This has a startling implication: as long as the work itself is meaningful, managers do not have to spend time coming up with ways to motivate people to do it. Leaders are much better served by removing barriers to progress, helping people experience the intrinsic satisfaction that derives from accomplishment.

The New Rules of Leadership

Paying the required attention to inner work life demands a new approach to leadership. According to the conventional rules of management in the Information Age, leaders *manage people*: they recruit the best talent, provide appropriate incentives, give developmental stretch assignments, use emotional intelligence to connect with each individual, review performance carefully, and retain those who clear the bar. As important as these activities are, relying exclusively on them means relying on the flawed assumption that an employee's performance depends solely on something inherent to the individual. This assumption ignores the fundamental impact of the work environment, the events unfolding in that work environment every day, and the leader's role in shaping those events.

In addition to revealing how much inner work life matters to employees and thus, to companies, our research turned up three potent forces that support inner work life. In order of importance, they are:

1. Making **progress** in meaningful work;
2. Receiving **catalysts** (things that directly help get the work done); and
3. Benefitting from **nourishers** (interpersonal events that uplift people as they work).

Let's examine each in detail.

#1 Influence on Inner Work Life: Progress

Of all the workday events that can boost a person's emotions and intrinsic drive to do a great job, the single most important is *making progress in meaningful work*. Although this 'progress principle' may seem obvious, it is anything but to most managers.

When we have asked dozens of managers, individually and in groups, to name the most important levers for motivating employees, they tend to favour the things that most management books tout: recognition, tangible incentives and clear goals. When we ask how they, as managers, might influence employee emotions, the list looked the same – with many adding interpersonal support. Very rarely does anyone mention *progress* and how managers should support it. Not surprisingly, in a 2009 **McKinsey** survey on motivating employees, progress was completely absent from the results.

To get to the bottom of this puzzle, we created a survey in which 669 managers ranked the importance of five factors that could influence motivations and emotions at work. Four of the items came from conventional management wisdom: recognition, incentives, interpersonal support and clear goals. The fifth item was 'support for making progress in the work'. Surely, we thought, if we explicitly include progress in the list, managers will put it at the top; but no. The results revealed a total unawareness of the power of progress, across all levels of management. Support for making progress was ranked dead last as a motivator,

and third (out of five) as an influence on emotion. And it's not just in what they say that managers seem oblivious to the power of progress; it's also in what they do. Across the companies we studied, only rarely could we identify managers who consistently supported their people in making progress.

The fact is that *progress* and *inner work life* feed each other: progress enhances inner work life and positive inner work life leads to further progress, creating a virtuous cycle. Mathematician **Norbert Wiener** called this sort of interaction a positive feedback loop or 'cumulative causation.' The loop can operate as a vicious cycle, as well, with setbacks (the opposite of progress) and negative inner work life feeding each other. Just as inner work life and progress improve in tandem, when one goes downhill, so does the other. A feedback loop is also self-reinforcing. Just as a physical object in motion, such as a pendulum in a vacuum, maintains its momentum unless acted on by an outside force, the progress loop continues unless other events interfere. Happily, a vicious cycle can be broken by intervening events, as well. It isn't easy, but it can be done by removing obstacles to progress and providing the supports necessary for success.

The 'progress loop' is a secret weapon of high-performance companies, producing a powerful win-win for both managers and employees. Consistent, daily progress by individual employees fuels both the success of the organization and the quality of those employees' inner work lives. To harness this powerful force, you must ensure that *consistent forward movement on meaningful work* is a regular occurrence in your employees' work lives, despite the inevitable setbacks that all non-trivial work entails.

In the real world, the pendulum of a clock keeps moving only if someone keeps it wound up. Similarly, as a manager, you must keep the progress loop 'ticking' by continually facilitating progress and removing obstacles.

#2 Influence on Inner Work Life: Catalysts

In Chemistry, a catalyst is a substance that initiates or accelerates a chemical reaction. In our research, we use this term to describe anything that directly facilitates the timely, creative, high-quality completion of work. Essentially, catalysts are progress supports. For example, a group of engineers at a biomedical firm receives catalysts when their research director lays out clear, consistent, meaningful goals for the next-generation medical device the team is creating; when the management team approves the funding they require; and when other groups in the organization, like purchasing, testing and marketing, help with everything from securing equipment for early research to gathering feedback from the medical community.

By contrast, *inhibitors* retard or block something from happening. Those same engineers face inhibitors when the research director waffles on the project's goals or defines them so narrowly that the team has no room for exploration; when management questions necessary resources, forcing the team to jump through hoops for every penny; and when other groups are too busy with

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other priorities to give team members the time of day. We use the term inhibitor to describe the absence of a catalyst (such as a failure to provide needed help) or the negative form of a catalyst (an active hindrance).

As we have described, progress and setbacks are the major influences on inner work life. Surprisingly, though, catalysts and inhibitors can have an immediate impact on inner work life, even before they could possibly affect the work itself. As soon as people realize that they have clear and meaningful goals, sufficient resources and helpful colleagues, they get an instant boost to their perceptions of the work and the organization, their emotions, and their motivation to do a great job. Support signifies a number of important things to people: that their work is valuable; that their contributions are valuable; that the organization cares about them; and that management really knows how to get things done. But as soon as goals are jumbled, resources denied, or the ball is dropped by a colleague, thoughts, feelings and drives begin to crumble.

Our research has revealed seven major catalysts along with their mirror opposites, seven major inhibitors.

1. Setting clear goals. People have better inner work lives when they know where their work is heading and why it matters. Unambiguous short- and long-term goals give teams tangible mileposts that render their progress salient. When people have conflicting priorities or unclear, arbitrarily-shifting goals, they become frustrated and demotivated.

2. Allowing autonomy. To be intrinsically motivated, people need to have some say in their own work. What's more, when employees have freedom in how to do their work, they are more creative. A key aspect of autonomy is feeling that one's decisions will hold; if they often get overridden by management, people quickly lose motivation to make any decision, which severely inhibits progress.

3. Providing resources: Access to necessary equipment, funding and personnel is a must. When employees lack these catalysts, they realize that progress will be difficult or impossible, and their inner work lives dip. Withholding necessary resources, or rendering them difficult to access, engenders a sense of futility, anger at the need to waste time scrounging, and a perception that the project must not be very important.

4. Giving enough time – but not too much. Although people become stressed and unmotivated if they have to work under extreme time pressure for weeks on end, they often feel excited, creative and productive after a single time-pressured day. Even a string of time-pressured days can be exhilarating. But using extreme time-pressure as a route to positive inner work life is akin to playing with fire. If managers are prone to giving impossibly short time-frames, employees develop unfavourable views of them and of the organization as a whole. In general, low-to-moderate time pressure seems optimal for sustaining positive thoughts, feelings and drives.

5. Helping with the work. In today's organizations, almost everyone works interdependently; little can get done without any assistance from someone else. 'Help' can take many forms, from providing needed information, to brainstorming with a colleague, to collaborating with someone who is struggling. Getting the right sort of help, from the right people at the right time, can give a significant boost to inner work life.

6. Learning from problems and successes. Problems and failures are inevitable in complex work. We have found that inner work life is much more positive when problems are faced squarely, analyzed, and met with plans to overcome or learn from them. Inner work life falters when problems are ignored, punished, or handled in a haphazard way. Learning from success matters, too: our participants' thoughts, feelings, and drives fared better when successes – even small ones – were celebrated and then analyzed for knowledge gained.

7. Allowing ideas to flow. The people in our study had some of their best days when ideas about their projects flowed freely within their team and across the organization. We found that ideas flowed best when managers truly listened to their workers, encouraged vigorous debate of diverse perspectives, and respected constructive critique. When this crucial catalyst was missing or inhibited, people seemed to shrink into themselves. In self-protective mode, inner work life is dominated by fearful emotions, negative perceptions of the work environment and stunted motivation.

#3 Influence on Inner Work Life: Nourishment
The 'nourishment factor' refers to something that everyone

craves at work: human connection. You nourish the inner work lives of your subordinates when you reward or recognize their good work, encourage them or offer emotional support. You might also help resolve interpersonal conflicts, provide opportunities for people to really know each other, or simply let them have some fun.

Although nourishers may matter more to some people than others, none of us can truly thrive without them. As humans, we want others to respect, recognize and enjoy us. When they do, we revel in the positive emotions of joy and pride and we are motivated to contribute to something wonderful. Across all the teams we studied, when people found someone reaching out to offer them nourishers, their inner work lives blossomed – which increased the odds that they would make progress in the work.

The nourishment factor can be divided into four broad categories.

1. Respect. Managerial actions determine whether people feel respected or disrespected, and recognition may be the most important of these actions. However large or small the tangible value of a reward for good work may be, and however formal or informal the recognition for such work, people feel respected when their efforts are acknowledged. Respect is also conveyed when managers give employees' ideas serious attention, signaling that they and their insights are valued. In addition, although it can be very difficult, dealing with people honestly shows respect. When people realize that a manager is misleading them – even when attempting to spare their feelings – they can conclude that the manager does not trust their professionalism. Finally, basic civility signifies respect and – because negative events are so much more powerful than positive events – incivility signifies strong disrespect.

2. Encouragement. Encouraging people can nourish inner work lives in a couple of ways. First, a manager's own enthusiasm can help to increase employees' motivation for the work. This is especially true when that encouragement includes statements about the importance of the work. Second, when a manager expresses confidence that people are capable of doing the work well, this message increases their sense of self-efficacy – their own belief that they are effective human beings.

3. Emotional support. Because emotions constitute one of the three essential components of inner work life, people feel more connected to others at work when their emotions are validated. This goes for emotions arising from events at work – like frustration at stubborn technical problems, as well as events in personal life – like grief following a loved one's death. Managers who simply acknowledge people's sorrows and frustrations – as well as their joys – can do much to alleviate the negative and amplify the positive emotions. Empathy is even better than simple acknowledgment. When someone directly tells a manager about an emotional experience, an empathetic word can go a long way toward easing the employee's mind and allowing her to get back to the task at hand.

4. Affiliation. Affiliation – actions that develop bonds of mutual trust, appreciation, and even affection with co-workers – is the most obvious way in which people feel the human connection at work. Affiliation is especially important when people telecommute, work virtually, or become project team members as contract workers rather than organizational employees. The need to bond with co-workers collaborating to achieve a shared mission does not evaporate when people do most of their work from their home offices or airport lounges; in fact, it intensifies.

When you think about some of the best days of your own work life, our guess is that many of them are days when you enjoyed this human connection. Indeed, sometimes this is what gets people most fired up about going to work and giving it their all. Great meaning can grow from the simple pleasure of enjoying one's colleagues.

The nourishment factor isn't just about providing pats on the back for a job well done or a pep talk at the end of a long week; it is also about establishing a foundation for subordinates to *give each other* nourishment. That means establishing a positive climate and considering personalities and work styles as well as skills when assigning people to teams. It also requires ensuring that people understand their roles so that they can coordinate their efforts and communicate openly with each other. We discovered that many managers have great difficulty doing either, and in the worst-case scenarios, they create a toxic work environment. When nourishers are lacking – or worse, when people feel disrespected, underappreciated, neglected or abused – inner work life quickly sours.

In closing

Whatever your role in an organization – even if you lead only by your work as a great colleague – you bear some responsibility for the inner work lives of those around you. Through your actions you can create and enable *catalysts* and *nourishers* and reduce *inhibitors* and *toxins* – greatly increasing the probability that everyone in the organization will make progress consistently.

In the end, you will become a better contributor to the success of your organization if you make it a habit to consider the effect of your everyday actions on your colleagues' inner work lives. Progress lives in the everyday – not just in quarterly reports, and managers can't help but influence subordinates' inner work lives. The only question is what direction your influence will take. *R*

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