

# The Progress Principle

**Using small wins to ignite joy, engagement, and creativity at work.**

Teresa Amabile and Steven Kramer

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Teresa Amabile is a psychologist at Harvard Business School. She investigates how life inside organizations can influence people and their performance. Originally focusing on individual creativity, she expanded her research to productivity, team creativity, and organizational innovation. She published *Creativity in Context*, and *Growing Up Creative*, as well as over 150 scholarly papers. Co-author Steven Kramer is also her husband. He is an independent researcher and writer.

The title – words such as ‘progress’ and ‘small wins’ – instantly made me think of SF ideas. Would there be a link? Teresa Amabile and Steven Kramer analyzed nearly 12,000 diary entries provided by 238 employees in seven different companies. Participants were told every day to describe one event from the day that stood out in their minds, regardless of what type of event it was. This information was analyzed by the authors and provides us valuable insights. What motivates employees? What drives them to perform at their best? The authors call it: a ‘satisfying inner work life’. When employees have a satisfying inner work life they have strong motivation, positive emotions and favorable perceptions of the organizations they work for and their colleagues. Employees will perform better, be more creative and more productive. Most interestingly, to enhance the inner work life, people must feel that they make progress in meaningful work. Progress is the single most powerful influence on inner work life. That is why the authors choose the word progress to be part of the title of their book and talk about the progress principle. The authors remark that video-game designers understood the importance of progress better than the average manager: they all include progress bars in the games to make them more addictive. Our SF scaling techniques do not seem to be far off!

The effect of setbacks on emotions is stronger than the effect of progress. Eliminating the obstacles that cause setbacks is therefore a good strategy. Barriers to progress are meaningless tasks and toxic relationships. The authors describe four ways to negate meaning, all very recognizable on a daily basis in corporate settings. Progress and inner work life feed each other, creating a virtuous circle. But the negative form can operate as a vicious cycle as well.

The authors identify two forces that enable progress, ‘catalysts’ and ‘nourishers’. Catalysts are events that directly facilitate project work: clear goals, autonomy, resources, enough (but not too much) time, help, learning from problems and successes and allowing ideas to flow. The opposite are inhibitors. Nourishers are interpersonal events that uplift workers, encouragement, demonstration of respect, emotional support and affiliation. Toxins are the opposite. The book also contains practical tips for managers, ‘Food for thought’ inserts and checklists.

This rigorous field study of inner work life results in evidence based understanding of what works and what does not work well in teams and organizations. And here comes in my opinion also some evidence why the SF approach is so powerful. Making progress in meaningful work, taking small steps at the time is exactly what SF provides. We set clear goals with our clients, a 'catalyst' factor. Other events such as respect, support, allowing ideas to flow, etc. are all part of the SF approach. The authors never refer to SF ideas however.

The authors, in spite of the enormous amount of details available, didn't drown in their rigor. The snippets of the diary entries were my favorite part. They give a fascinating insight into what is going on in the minds of the participants. It makes the book more lively and real. The book is easy and engaging to read. It contains many useful implications to motivate people in the workspace and points to little things that managers and leaders can do day after day to spark creativity and well-being. These little things, small wins, will lead to ... future perfect?

Review by: Renilde Vervoort, *InterAction, The Journal of Solution Focus in Organisations*, Vol. 4, 1, 123-125.