



Center for Creative Leadership

LEADING Effectively e-Newsletter

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The Progress Principle

An interview with Teresa Amabile, professor and director of research at Harvard Business School

What do you think it would take to boost performance, fuel creativity and increase motivation for yourself and your team? More resources, recognition, raises? A miracle?

The surprisingly simple but powerful answer is "making progress on meaningful work," says Teresa Amabile.

Amabile is a professor and a director of research at Harvard Business School and co-author of [The Progress Principle: Using Small Wins to Ignite Joy, Engagement and Creativity at Work](#). She's also an accomplished speaker (see her [TEDx Atlanta talk](#)) and recently spoke with us about her research and its implications.

CCL: You found that making progress is so essential because of its role in creating a positive inner work life. Define inner work life.

TA: Inner work life is the constant stream of emotions, perceptions and motivations that people experience as they react to and make sense of events during their workday.

Events of the day are triggers that change inner work life. Our emotions can become more positive or more negative as a result of an event. At the same time, we try to make sense of what happened. We form judgments about the event and what it means. This often happens below the level of consciousness. Together, perceptions and emotions influence motivation — a person's drive to do something.

CCL: Inner work life wasn't your focus when you began the research study that led to *The Progress Principle*. You were looking to understand how positive and negative environments affect creative productivity, right?

TA: Yes. We wanted to get a very deep inside look at what was going on in the hearts and minds of people while they were trying to do creative work. Could we trace what was happening inside people, projects and organizations and link it somehow to performance?

We recruited 238 professionals on 26 creative project teams in seven profitable and respected companies in three industries. Most of the projects were new product development; some were solving a complex client problem or creating a new business process.

Each month the Premium subscribers of *Leading Effectively* have access to an interview with a thought leader, author or expert. Through these interviews, we offer different perspectives on topics related to leadership. Featured in the May, 2012 issue was Teresa Amabile, co-author of [The Progress Principle: Using Small Wins to Ignite Joy, Engagement and Creativity at Work](#).



We sent each participant an e-mail every day — Monday through Friday — during the entire course of their team's project and asked them to fill out a confidential electronic diary form that had several survey questions about inner work life and one open-ended question. We received 75 percent back — an amazing response rate — equaling nearly 12,000 diary entries.

CCL: And that open-end question turned out to be the most important part of the diary.

TA: It was certainly the most revealing question. We asked people to briefly describe one work-related event from the day that stood out in their mind. We did not tell them that we were looking at creativity. We didn't tell them to report their emotions, motivations or perceptions. We didn't ask them to tell us about their inner work life. We just said, "Report an event that occurred today in as much detail as you can recall."

But a hefty percentage of these diaries did tell us how the event made the diarists feel, how it made them change their views of their organization or their coworkers, or how it affected their motivation. It was as if they couldn't really tell us about this event without saying how it affected their inner work life.

That indicated to us how important inner work life is — you can't separate it out from the work. This was a major discovery.

CCL: What else did you learn from the research?

TA: The second big finding was that inner work life influences *performance*.

On those days and weeks and months when people had more positive inner work life, they were more likely to perform better in four ways. They were more likely to be creative and productive, to demonstrate a high level of commitment to their work, and to act as better colleagues to each other.

If inner work life is so important for people and for their performance, the next step was to find out what factors influence inner work life.

This led us to our next major discovery. Analyzing the 12,000 diaries, we learned that, of all the events that can make for a great workday, the single most important is *simply making progress in meaningful work*. That is the *progress principle*.

I should also say that making progress isn't the No.1 factor by a little bit — it is No. 1 by a lot. There was no other single event that was nearly as predominant as progress on the best days at work.

So, progress makes people feel good. And when they feel good, they are more likely to do good work — which, in turn, makes them feel even better. That pattern can build on itself and create a *progress loop*.

CCL: But even though making progress is far and away the best way to have a great workday, you found that progress is largely ignored as a motivator.

TA: It may sound obvious that making progress matters, but we wondered if managers understand how important it is.

After we finished the diary study, we conducted a survey of nearly 700 managers at all levels, from a variety of companies around the world. We listed five employee motivators and asked the managers to rank them in terms of how important they thought they were for employee motivation. And one of the five was supporting

progress in the work — which we know, from the diary study, is the No. 1 daily motivator. The others were the more traditional motivators like incentives and recognition.

Most managers ranked progress dead last. Only 5 percent of the managers ranked progress No. 1. Even if they were making these choices randomly, progress would be ranked first by 20 percent. It was like they were actively saying, "I don't think this is that important." That is a huge gap, when progress is *the* most important thing. Moreover, in the diary study, we discovered that only a small minority of managers consistently support the progress of their subordinates.

CCL: How do we put the progress principle into action?

TA: First, remember that the progress principle is about making progress on meaningful work. We found that the progress principle does apply very broadly — except in those instances when people feel like they are doing something that is meaningless. Getting a lot done doesn't necessarily make them feel great or get them deeply engaged in the work. So one step is to help people see how their work contributes to something that they value.

Another important piece is the power of small wins. The progress principle applies even for small steps forward, which might seem trivial at first. Even one meaningful, though small, step forward can make people feel great the day it happens.

CCL: What can we do to support small wins and encourage progress?

TA: I recommend that managers keep a daily progress checklist for their team. This involves simply asking themselves a few questions each day, and recording their answers. Did my team make progress today? If not, why not? What inhibitors might be stalling them and getting in their way? What can I do to remove those inhibitors? That's what the best leaders did in our study.

For yourself as an individual contributor, I recommend keeping a daily journal. Spending 5 or 10 minutes to journal at the end of each workday can help you track your accomplishments, contributions and setbacks; boost your awareness of your goals and progress toward them; and help you make sense of the workday.

This idea came directly from our research participants. Many people said that taking 5 or 10 minutes to reflect on the day made them feel better and work more effectively. Sometimes they got something negative off their chest. Other times, at the end of a long frustrating day when it felt like they hadn't gotten anything done, it helped them to think back and see that they did, in fact, make progress on something — even if it was a small win.