



INFLUENCE PERFORMANCE THROUGH PROGRESS

31 May 2013

Positively impacting performance

1. Make time (because it's much easier than 'finding time') near the end of each day to reflect on the progress you've made during the day. Fifteen to twenty minutes would be a good start.

If you've moved things forward, that's progress. Celebrate the progress you've made and where you'll pick up the following day to continue moving forward.

Although there may also have been little setbacks here and there in your day, this is *not* the time to focus on those!

2. Managers clearly also have an interest in their people making progress.

First, self-appreciation of progress has a much greater impact than manager praise. Where possible, set tasks up so that people can self-monitor and recognise progress on their own. Of course, manager praise on top of self-assessment is also very helpful!

Second, spend some time daily reviewing progress and setbacks in the team. What can you do to minimise or eliminate setbacks? How can you facilitate progress?

Delivering outcomes

With the end of June rapidly approaching, it's likely that you have performance front of mind. For most, June 30 is financial year-end. Even if you've been monitoring targets and outputs continuously, it's 'line-in-the-sand' time. What was performance like against targets? How does this year's output compare with that of last year? Although bonuses might only be calculated and distributed once accounts are finalised, this may also be a time when you need to spend more time thinking about performance-based incentives.

Thinking about performance, which of the following five employee motivators has greatest influence over performance outcomes? 1. Incentives. 2. Recognition. 3. Clear goals. 4. Making progress in work. 5. Interpersonal support. Take a moment and make your choice. The answer, based on recent research, will be revealed in the paragraphs below.

Researching 'inner work life' in organisations

Harvard Business School Professor, Dr Teresa Amabile, and her researcher-writer life partner, Dr Steven Kramer, have a special interest in performance in organisations. Both have PhDs in psychology and have focused over the years on what influences performance at work.

Amabile and Kramer leveraged email to survey 238 people, working in 26 teams within 7 organisations, on a daily basis for an extended period – some over 3 months. Each day people were asked to rate a variety of factors, such as personal mood, team work, and creative and other work outputs. A free text box allowed respondents to share any thoughts they had about their day at work.

Many business research studies use surveys. The method is efficient and, through a large enough sample size, often yields useful results. One drawback though is that the survey is a lot like a photo. It's a fixed snapshot at a particular time. Sometimes researchers use multiple surveys to track changes over time. For example, monthly or quarterly. None however have previously gathered the depth of data on motivators at work that Amabile and Kramer managed to collect using their daily survey technique. As a result, the research delivered fascinating and highly valuable insights.

Over 70% of the 238 people initially recruited chose to contribute to the study for a sustained period of time. Consequently, researchers collected personal ratings and reflections for over 12,000 person-days at work. Powerful! Even more valuable because respondents worked in teams and colleagues also contributed daily diaries. Researchers then pooled entries to determine how the same events and behaviours impacted different people.

Surprising research results

After spending a couple of years carefully coding and analysing their data, Amabile and Kramer were quite surprised by what they found most influenced performance at work. In fact, fascinated by the novelty (and potency) of their findings, they felt compelled to do an additional study to see if managers were using the powerful motivator despite no formal research evidence. Just as you did earlier, 700 managers were asked to rank five employee motivators.

Which influencer did you rate as most potent? Amabile and Kramer's large study found strong evidence for 'progress in meaningful work' being the most powerful of the five motivators listed. Yet, only 5% of managers rated 'progress at work' as the employee motivator having the most impact. As a matter of interest, in a very small survey conducted by UGM, only 10% of respondents rated 'progress at work' as the number one staff motivator.

Performance at work

Of all the factors that might have emerged from the extensive research, 'making progress' had the most profound impact on performance, both short- and long-term. Specifically, making progress (or the opposite, experiencing setbacks) affected four key dimensions of performance in 'knowledge work' environments: creativity, collegiality, commitment and productivity.

Simply, making progress was by far the single most prominent factor associated with the ratings of 'best days'. Similarly, setbacks were most often associated with 'worst days'. More astonishing was the huge difference in performance impact between days that delivered progress and those that presented setbacks.

First, 'good days' were strong statistical indicators that creativity, for example, would be enhanced the following day, and even possibly the day after that. On the other hand, setbacks on a particular day were predictive of lower performance on the day following and maybe even the day after that. Importantly, this effect was observed even when the progress and setbacks were 'small'. Measured on a daily basis, most were!

Second, Amabile and Kramer calculated (statistically from the 12,000 'days' data) that negative events had five times the effect of positive events. Interestingly, participants spent most time writing about 'bad days'. Negative work events were remembered much more intensely than positive events. Similarly, negative manager behaviours were also recalled with much greater (and more destructive) intensity.

Do you consciously manage for progress, including your own? Tips in the sidebar will help you tap into work's most powerful motivator.