Amabile and Kramer's Progress Theory
Your 10-Minute Guide to Using "Small Wins" to Motivate Your Team

Learn why making and recognizing progress is so important to your team’s happiness and success.

There are many ways that you can motivate and inspire your team. For instance, you can provide a positive, energizing workplace, with plenty of opportunities to build strong relationships. You can use incentives, such as bonuses or other rewards, to keep your team focused. And, you can provide plenty of support, and publicly recognize people’s hard work.

However, the way that people complete their work can also have a significant effect on motivation, and that’s what we’re looking at in this 10-Minute Guide.

In it, we’ll see how consistent progress in the form of “small wins” can boost people’s motivation and performance. We’ll also explore strategies that you can use to help your own team achieve small wins as part of their work.

This guide highlights how managers can motivate their people by helping them recognize the progress they make with their work.

Please feel free to share it inside your organization.
About Progress Theory

Professor Teresa Amabile and Steven Kramer wrote in detail about how progress can boost performance in their 2011 book, “The Progress Principle.”

In their research, they asked 238 people (from 26 project teams in seven major organizations) to keep an anonymous diary, so that they could track their experiences on a daily basis. They received more than 12,000 separate diary entries, which they used to analyze people’s “inner work lives” – their perceptions, emotions, and motivation levels – and to explore how this affected their performance.

They found that when people consistently take steps forward – even small steps – on meaningful projects, they are more creative, productive, and engaged, and they have better relationships. This, in turn, has a positive influence on their work performance.

In short, achieving and recognizing regular “small wins” can help people have rich, engaged, and productive work lives. As any experienced manager knows, happy, engaged, and productive team members can achieve far more than unhappy team members.

Applying the Theory

So, how can you apply this theory with your team?

Amabile and Kramer identified six things that you can do to give people the best chance of experiencing and recognizing meaningful progress.

These are as follows:

1. **Set Clear Goals and Objectives**

When people have unclear or changing goals, they don’t know what to focus on. This means that they’re likely to be less engaged with the work that they’re doing, and they’re unlikely to see the small tasks that they do as “wins.”

So, make sure that you set SMART (Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Relevant, and Time-bound) goals for everyone on your team; and change them only when you have to. Your people need to understand what’s expected of them, so that they know when they’ve achieved these goals.

They also need to understand the connection between the work that they’re doing and the value that it provides to others, whether these people are the organization’s customers, the organization itself, or even society as a whole. After all, we all want to feel that our work has meaning, and that it benefits others.

Help your team make this connection by using Management by Objectives. This is a useful way of aligning your people’s objectives with the goals of your organization.

2. **Allow Autonomy**

Although your people need specific goals, they also need some freedom to decide how they accomplish these goals – the more control that people have over their own work, the more empowered and creative they’ll be, and the more that they’ll recognize their own contributions (even on small tasks).

So, make sure that you avoid micromanagement – this destroys morale and engagement, and leaves no room for autonomy. (But also bear in mind that this won’t work in all situations, for example, where people have to follow strict safety procedures.)

3. **Provide Resources**

Without sufficient resources in place, it will be difficult for your people to succeed in their work. They might conclude that their work isn’t important, and they might waste time on non-core tasks that don’t help them reach their objectives.

So, make sure that your people have the tools and resources they need to do their jobs properly. This includes technology, knowledge (including training and development), support, and supplies.

4. **Allow Ample Time**

Your people also need enough time to complete their work: consistently setting short deadlines will harm creativity, drive down work quality, and cause burnout.

That being said, there is an optimum amount of pressure that can actually enhance performance. Therefore, you need to set deadlines that create enough pressure to motivate good performance, yet still allow people the freedom to be creative and innovative.
5. **Provide Support and Expertise**

Make sure that your team has access to the help and expertise of other people, so that they can move forward with their work.

As their manager, this includes you, but it also includes other managers, colleagues, outside experts, or even customers and suppliers.

Also, foster a collaborative environment, where team members can be creative and bounce ideas around between themselves.

6. **Learn from Honest "Failure"**

No matter how well you plan and prepare, there will be times when people fail at tasks or projects. This will sometimes be because their work was careless, however, other times, people may have done their genuine best, but failed for reasons outside their control.

Clearly, you need to deal with sloppy work appropriately.

However, some organizations deal harshly with honest failure. This not only lowers morale and makes people afraid to try new things, but it also encourages them to see failures as wasted time, rather than as experiences that they can learn from.

Support your people when they’ve done their honest best, but have still failed. Without assigning blame, discuss how all of you will move forward and grow.

Teach them how to overcome fear of failure, and allow them to take appropriate risks.

**Key Points**

The Progress Theory was developed by Teresa Amabile and Steven Kramer.

They determined that achieving consistent, small wins was the biggest indicator of people having a rich, happy inner work life. This rich inner work life, in turn, enables people to be more productive, more engaged, and more creative in the work that they do.

Amabile and Kramer came up with six things that managers should do to help their team members achieve regular small wins:

1. Set clear goals and objectives.
2. Allow autonomy.
3. Provide resources.
4. Allow ample time.
5. Provide support and expertise.
6. Help people learn from “failure.”

As well as using these approaches, you should encourage your people to recognize and celebrate their own successes, however small.