

The Power Of Small Wins: 5 Questions With Teresa Amabile

Earlier this week I reviewed a fascinating new book called [*The Progress Principle: Using Small Wins to Ignite Joy, Engagement, and Creativity at Work*](#), by Teresa Amabile and Steven Kramer, two of the foremost authorities on creativity in business. I had the chance to ask Teresa a few questions about progress, small wins and creativity.

Q: Why is creativity in business an issue in the first place?

A: Some people believe that “creativity in business” is an oxymoron, but they couldn’t be more wrong. All human progress depends on creativity—the production of something new and useful. Because the world is changing so rapidly today, with lightning-fast shifts in technology, economics, and society, businesses need great agility in coming up with new, useful solutions. This is particularly important for startups and small businesses, because their constrained resources put them at greater risk of extinction. Entrepreneurs need to be creative in nearly everything they do—from perceiving opportunities that others miss, to finding resources, to wooing customers.

Q: The number of books, articles, studies and blogs on human creativity and motivation number in the tens of thousands...what have you discovered that no one else has?

A: We discovered what we call “progress loops,” which are made up of two forces. First is the inner work life effect: People are more creative on days when they have better inner work lives—when they think more highly of their jobs and coworkers, feel more upbeat, and have stronger passion for the work they are doing.

Second is the “progress principle.” Of all the things that can make people think highly of their jobs, feel upbeat, and experience passion for the work, the single most important is simply making progress in meaningful work. This means that inner work life and creativity feed each other. When people have better inner work lives, they are more creatively productive—and, when they are creatively productive, their inner work lives get a boost. Although some researchers have discovered parts of the inner work life effect, what we’ve been able to do is tie everything together with the concept of these virtuous cycles that are progress loops.

Q: Is there a dark side to the progress principle...and if so, what is it?

A: The progress principle has a dark side. Of all the things that can cause people to have lousy inner work lives, the single most important is experiencing setbacks—feeling stalled or blocked in the work, or having a sense of moving backward. Amazingly, the negative effect of setbacks on emotions, perceptions and motivation can be 2 to 3 times greater than the positive impact of progress. This means it’s especially important for business owners and managers to reduce or eliminate forces that inhibit people’s ability to feel like they are getting somewhere on something

that matters. Inhibitors can be very mundane—like a goal that isn't sufficiently clear, or a person in the organization who hoards information—but they can be deadly.

Q: What's the most surprising thing you discovered in your research?

A: The power of small events. We found that 28 percent of minor work events have a major impact on inner work life. So, the progress principle applies even if people have a “small win”—a seemingly small step forward. Breakthrough moments are great—those incredible “Aha” experiences that can lead to quantum jumps in innovation. But they are exceedingly rare. Small wins can happen—and they should happen—on a regular basis. We found that people can feel ecstatic and really jazzed about their work even if, for example, they discover an algorithm that makes a new process work a bit more smoothly or fix a bug in some software they are creating. Of course, small losses—little setbacks—can have a powerfully negative effect on inner work life, which is why it's important for business leaders at all levels to root out inhibitors. It's also crucial to help people learn from the inevitable setbacks that occur in risky, complex, creative work. That can turn a setback into a small win.

Q: Given all you've discovered, what one piece of advice would give a small business owner?

A: Keep a daily progress checklist. At the end of every day, spend just five minutes writing down the progress your people made on their most important creative work, noting any setbacks that stalled them. Jot down the major forces that catalyzed or inhibited their progress that day, and write a one-sentence plan for the next day. What one thing can you do to best facilitate people's progress in meaningful work? Then do it. Matt, as you have said, it really is important to sweat the small stuff.