

The Power of Small Wins

What is the best way to motivate employees to do creative work? Help them take a step forward every day.

In an analysis of knowledge workers' diaries, the authors found that nothing contributed more to a positive inner work life (the mix of emotions, motivations, and perceptions that is critical to performance) than making progress in meaningful work.

If a person is motivated and happy at the end of the workday, it's a good bet that he or she achieved something, however small. If the person drags out of the office disengaged and joyless, a setback is likely to blame.

This progress principle suggests that managers have more influence than they may realize over employees' well-being, motivation, and creative output. The key is to learn which actions support progress--such as setting clear goals, providing sufficient time and resources, and offering recognition--and which have the opposite effect. Even small wins can boost inner work life tremendously.

On the flip side, small losses or setbacks can have an extremely negative effect. And the work doesn't need to involve curing cancer in order to be meaningful. It simply must matter to the person doing it. The actions that set in motion the positive feedback loop between progress and inner work life may sound like Management 101, but it takes discipline to establish new habits.