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LEADERSHIP
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What Really Motivates Workers

*Understanding the
power of progress*

ratings of their motivation and emotion, shows that making progress in one's work—even incremental progress—is more frequently associated with positive emotions and high motivation than any other workday event. For example, it was noted on 76% of people's best days, when their reported moods were most buoyant, and on only 25% of their worst. (The exhibit "What Happens on a Great Workday?" shows how progress compared with the other four most frequently reported positive events.)

The Breakthrough Idea As a manager of people, you should regard this as very good news: The key to motivation turns out to be largely within your control. What's more, it doesn't depend on elaborate incentive systems. (In fact, the people in our study rarely mentioned incentives in their diaries.) Managers have powerful influence over events that facilitate or undermine progress. They can provide meaningful goals, resources, and encouragement, and they can protect their people from irrelevant demands. Or they can fail to do so.

This brings us to perhaps the strongest advice we offer from this study: Scrupulously avoid impeding progress by clearing

This was apparent in vivid detail in the diaries we asked these knowledge workers to e-mail us every day. In one end-of-day entry, an information systems professional rejoiced that she'd finally figured out why something hadn't been working correctly. "I felt relieved and happy because this was a minor milestone for me," she wrote, adding that her efforts to enhance a specific version of software were now "90% complete." A close analysis of nearly 12,000 diary entries, together with the writers' daily

The Problem Ask leaders what they think makes employees enthusiastic about work, and they'll tell you in no uncertain terms. In a recent survey we invited more than 600 managers from dozens of companies to rank the impact on employee motivation and emotions of five workplace factors commonly considered significant: recognition, incentives, inter-personal support, support for making progress, and clear goals. "Recognition for good work (either public or private)" came out number one.

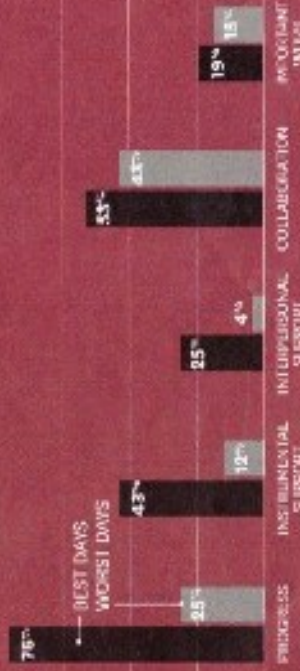
Unfortunately, those managers are wrong.

Having just completed a multiyear study tracking the day-to-day activities, emotions, and motivation levels of hundreds of knowledge workers in a wide variety of settings, we now know what the top motivator of performance is—and, amazingly, it's the factor those survey participants ranked dead last. It's progress. On days when workers have the sense they're making headway in their jobs, or when they receive support that helps them overcome obstacles, their emotions are most positive and their drive to succeed is at its peak. On days when they feel they are spinning their wheels or encountering roadblocks to meaningful accomplishment, their moods and motivation are lowest.

When workers sense they're making headway, their drive to succeed is at its peak.

WHAT HAPPENS ON A GREAT WORKDAY?

On 76% of their best days, diaries mentioned progress, making it the most frequently reported type of event on those days.



ing goals automatically, being indecisive, or holding up resources. Negative events generally have a greater effect on people's emotions, perceptions, and motivation than positive ones, and nothing is more demotivating than a setback—the most prominent type of event on knowledge workers' worst days.

The Promise You can proactively create both the perception and the reality of progress. If you are a high-ranking manager, take great care to clarify overall goals, ensure that people's efforts are properly supported, and refrain from exerting time pressure so intense that minor glitches are perceived as crises rather than learning opportunities. Cultivate a culture of helpfulness. While you're at it, you can facilitate progress in a more direct way: Roll up your sleeves and pitch in. Of course, all these efforts will not only keep people working with gusto but also get the job done faster.

As for recognition, the diaries revealed that it does indeed motivate workers and lift their moods. So managers should celebrate progress, even the incremental sort. But there will be nothing to recognize if people aren't genuinely moving forward and as a practical matter, recognition can't happen every day. You can, however, see that progress happens every day.

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