# Harvard Business Review

*The first comprehensive look at what employees are thinking and feeling as they go about their work, why it matters, and how managers can use this information to improve job performance.*

# Inner Work Life
## Understanding the Subtext of Business Performance

by Teresa M. Amabile and Steven J. Kramer

Included with this full-text *Harvard Business Review* article:

# Inner Work Life

Understanding the Subtext of Business Performance

## The Idea in Brief

You've given your best employees pats on the back. You've injected light-hearted fun into the workplace. And you've provided emotional support when needed. So why aren't your people delivering *peak* performance?

Perhaps you've neglected their **inner work lives**—the complex interplay between employees' deeply private *perceptions* of what's happening around them, the *emotions* they experience as a result of those perceptions, and their level of *motivation* to do good work.

When people form negative perceptions—of their manager, organization, coworkers, work, or themselves—they feel frustrated and unhappy. Motivation shrivels. Performance suffers in the short *and* long run. But when employees form positive perceptions, the cycle turns from vicious to virtuous.

How to promote positive perceptions? Manipulate some simple levers, say Amabile and Kramer. In particular, **create conditions that enable people to get their work done**, and you'll create positive emotions, enhance motivation, and boost performance to unprecedented levels.

## The Idea in Practice

Amabile and Kramer offer these suggestions for promoting positive inner work lives in your employees:

### DEMYSTIFY THE INNER WORK LIFE SYSTEM

The interplay among employees' perceptions, emotions, and motivation form a complex system that can fuel—or kill—performance. This system operates all day long, unseen, within every employee—and in response to every event. Steps in the system include:

1. An event happens at work—for example, a manager fails to respond to an employee's e-mail, a worker solves a nagging technical problem, or top management announces a major layoff.

2. Each employee tries to figure out why the event happened and what its implications are.

3. If perceptions resulting from this "sense making" are negative, the person experiences feelings such as anger, sadness, and disgust. If perceptions are positive, an employee experiences positive emotions—including satisfaction, pride, and elation.

4. Positive emotions fuel people's motivation, which in turn drives performance along four key dimensions: **creativity** (ability to come up with novel and useful ideas), **productivity**, **commitment** to the work, and **collegiality** (contributions to team cohesiveness). Not surprisingly, negative emotions corrode motivation, so performance suffers.

### ACTIVATE A VIRTUOUS CYCLE IN EMPLOYEES' INNER WORK LIVES

Typical management techniques such as praising subordinates, working collaboratively with them, and making the workplace fun or relaxing can all help establish a positive cycle in employees' inner work lives.

But the *single* most important lever is to give people the sense that they can make progress in their work. Success in achieving a goal, accomplishing a task, or solving a problem—whether mundane or immense—evokes intense pleasure and even joy.

To enable your people to get their work done:

- Provide direct help.

- Give them adequate resources and time to do their jobs.

- React to successes and failures with a learning orientation rather than a purely evaluative one.

- Set clear goals—by explaining where the work is heading and why it matters to the team, the organization, and the company's customers.

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# Inner Work Life

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If your organization demands knowledge work from its people, then you undoubtedly appreciate the importance of sheer brainpower. You probably recruit high-intellect people and ensure they have access to good information. You probably also respect the power of incentives and use formal compensation systems to channel that intellectual energy down one path or another. But you might be overlooking another crucial driver of a knowledge worker's performance—that person's inner work life. People experience a constant stream of emotions, perceptions, and motivations as they react to and make sense of the events of the workday. As people arrive at their workplaces they don't check their hearts and minds at the door. Unfortunately, because inner work life is seldom openly expressed in modern organizations, it's all too easy for managers to pretend that private thoughts and feelings don't matter.

As psychologists, we became fascinated a decade ago with day-to-day work life. But our research into inner work life goes well beyond intellectual curiosity about the complex operations of emotions, perceptions, and motivations. It addresses the very pragmatic managerial question of how these dynamics affect work performance. To examine this question, we constructed a research project that would give us a window into the inner work lives of a broad population of knowledge workers. Specifically, we recruited 238 professionals from 26 project teams and had them complete daily diary entries, in a standard format, for the duration of their projects. Nearly 12,000 diary entries later, we have discovered the dynamics of inner work life and the significant effect it can have on the performance of your people—and, by implication, your entire organization.

It may stun you, if you are a manager, to learn what power you hold. Your behavior as a manager dramatically shapes your employees' inner work lives. But the key levers in your hands for driving motivation and performance may not be the ones you'd suspect.

## More Than Meets the Eye

Think about your own most recent day at the office, and try to recall it in some detail. What would hidden observers have been able to learn had they been watching you go through that day? They might have read e-mails you composed, looked over the numbers you plugged into spreadsheets, reviewed the reports you prepared. They would have noted your interactions, in formal meetings or hallway encounters, with colleagues, subordinates, and superiors and listened in on a presentation you delivered. They would have heard your end of various telephone conversations, perhaps with customers, suppliers, or consultants. Maybe they would have watched you sitting quietly for a while, looking off into space, jotting down a few notes.

But would these observers really understand your inner work life that day? Of course not. In having those conversations and writing those reports, you were not only dealing with the task at hand. As events unfolded, you were also forming and adjusting perceptions about the people you work with, the organization you are part of, the work you do, and even yourself. You were experiencing emotions, maybe mild states of satisfaction or irritation, maybe intense feelings of pride or frustration. And these perceptions and emotions were intertwining to affect your work motivation from moment to moment—with consequences for your performance that day.

This is what we mean by inner work life: the dynamic interplay among personal *perceptions*, ranging from immediate impressions to more fully developed theories about what is happening and what it means; *emotions*, whether sharply defined reactions (such as elation over a particular success or anger over a particular obstacle) or more general feeling states, like good and bad moods; and *motivation*—your grasp of what needs to be done and your drive to do it at any given moment. Inner work life is crucial to a person's experience of the workday but for the most part is imperceptible to others. Indeed, it goes largely unexamined even by the individual experiencing it.

In order to study inner work lives, we needed a level of access beyond that of an observer. Thus, we relied on the classic form of the personal diary. Every day, we sent a standard e-mail to every participant requesting a brief description, for our eyes only, of an event

that stood out in his or her mind from that workday. (See the sidebar "How We Studied State of Mind" for more details on the study.) Their remarks tended to make clear what they thought of the event—what it said to them about their work, their team, their organization, or themselves—and how it made them feel. Beyond that, we had participants rate themselves and each of their teammates monthly along various dimensions (creativity, work quality, commitment to the work, and contributions to team cohesiveness). Because whole teams participated in the study, we were able to triangulate responses from colleagues, strengthening our understanding of notable events and their effects. Finally, rather than relying solely on a team's diaries to assess its overall performance, we also included evaluations by knowledgeable people outside the team.

We were immediately rewarded with evidence of the richness and intensity of people's inner work lives and the proof that they were influenced strongly by the events of the day. What also emerged over time was evidence of the interplay among perceptions, emotions, and motivations—an inner work life system (See the exhibit "Processing Work Events: What Happens Inside.") This discovery fits well with what is already known about the human brain. Recent research in neuroscience has found that emotion and cognition (which includes perception of events) are tightly intertwined. Areas of the brain associated with rational thought and decision making have direct connections to areas associated with feelings. They do not exist in separate psychological compartments, and they interact in complex ways. Like any system, the brain cannot be understood simply by looking at each individual component. Inner work life functions the same way: It is crucial to consider all components and their interactions.

When something happens at work—some workday event—it immediately triggers cognitive, emotional, and motivational processes. People's minds start "sensemaking": They try to figure out why the event happened and what its implications are. These perceptions feed the emotions evoked by the event, and the emotions, in turn, feed the perceptions. Depending on what happens with these cognitive and emotional processes, motivation can shift, which, in turn, affects how people per-

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form their work. We discerned these processes in the diaries of every team we studied and in most of the people who worked on those teams.

Consider how the dynamics played out with Infomap, a nine-person team of information technologists at DataBrook, a subsidiary of DreamSuite Hotels, that we tracked through various projects across a five-month period. (We have disguised all names and other identifying information about the people and their company.) One urgent project, dubbed the "BigDeal" project, came up suddenly in the fourth month of our study and had enormous financial implications. DreamSuite was being sued for more than $145 million, and its legal department required a great deal of analysis of financial records in order to defend the company. Infomap had eight days to complete the work.

**Perception.** As the diary entries shown in the exhibit "The Reality Management Never Sees" reveal, the project had significant effects on the inner work lives of the team members. What first becomes clear in studying the diary entries is that people's "events of the day" caused them to form perceptions. Clark's diary entry for May 26, for example, describes the start of the project and the activity surrounding it. Clearly he is engaging in sensemaking, and he comes away with positive perceptions of the "extreme importance" of the work done in his office, the "problem-solving capability" of his team, and the "supportive" nature of management. We see the same kind of reflection by Chester as the project winds up on May 31. His sensemaking produces positive perceptions of the team's coleader (Ellen), the team itself, other groups in the organization, and top management. These perceptions were triggered by specific events—for example, the extraordinary efforts of Ellen, who rolled up her sleeves and worked alongside the team.

**Emotion.** We also see the impact of daily events on people's emotions. Helen is inordinately pleased when an upper manager brings refreshments to the team. Marsha reacts to an example of outstanding teamwork with great pleasure. The work atmosphere on May 31 is "happy and light," she notes—even though they were working on Memorial Day, which should have been a holiday for everyone. Chester's upbeat emotions on May 31 are likewise unmistakable.

There is evidence, too, even in the span of these few diary entries, of interplay between perceptions and emotions. When a high-level executive delivers bottled water and pizza to the people working after hours, not only does the event cause happy surprise, it also sends a real signal to the workers. That seemingly trivial event caused people on the BigDeal project to perceive their work and themselves as important and valued, which evoked additional positive emotions. Similar emotions arose when other colleagues and teams offered to pitch in, reinforcing the positive perceptions that team members had formed of those people—and leading, over time, to even more positive emotions.

**Motivation.** High levels of motivation are also on display in the BigDeal project diaries. The entry by Marsha on May 27, for example, reveals that she has just worked 15 hours straight. Yet she describes what she's just endured as "one of the best days I've had in months!!" She notes, in that entry, that "our entire office worked like a real team" and referred to their work as the "big project." Her previous diary entries allowed us to understand how her motivation on May 27 resulted from positive emotions and perceptions. We found, in those entries, that she often felt elated when the team worked closely together, and she perceived herself and her work as more valued when others in the organization signaled its importance. These effects of emotion and perception on motivation make perfect sense. If people are sad or angry about their work, they won't care about doing it well. If they are happy and excited about it, they will leap to the task and put great effort behind it. The same goes for perception. If people perceive the work, and themselves, as having high value, their motivation will be high. Just as important, if they perceive a clear path forward, with little ambiguity about what will constitute progress, motivation levels rise. The BigDeal project had all this going for it. People felt highly valued and certain about what needed to be accomplished. Ultimately, this translated to high performance on the project. Not only did the team get the work done on time, but its high quality made an immediate and measurable contribution to the company's success.

The BigDeal project is all the more striking in comparison with the other projects we

*Would hidden observers watching you go through the day really understand your inner work life? Of course not.*

tracked for this team. In other periods, we were able to see the same inner work life system operating—but in much less positive ways. Despite the experiences during the Big-Deal project, all was not rosy between the team and upper-level management. When, early in our study, an acquisition was announced, employees interpreted the event as a hostile takeover and reacted to it emotionally. Diary entries during that time used terms like "boneheaded" and "bigoted bunch of plantation owners" to describe top management. When layoffs were announced after the acquisition, the entire team perceived the process as unfair. They expressed considerable fear and anger in their diaries and a markedly decreased level of motivation ("People are walking around scared and afraid for their jobs" and "What kills me is, after this, they will turn around and wonder why everyone doesn't just throw themselves in front of a train for the company…what dopes"). In fact, during the entire time we studied the team—with the exception of the BigDeal project—the team members perceived their company's executive leaders as aloof and oblivious to the team's

good work and reacted with varying levels of sadness, anger, and disgust.

Were managers aware of the team's intensely positive perceptions, emotions, and motivations during the BigDeal project? Were they aware of its extremely negative inner work life at other times? Maybe. But when we met with the team, they made it clear that they generally displayed their emotions and described their perceptions only to each other or kept them entirely private. Our research suggests that most managers are not in tune with the inner work lives of their people; nor do they appreciate how pervasive the effects of inner work life can be on performance.

### What Gets Done When People Have Good Days?

There is a long-standing debate among management scholars on the question of how work performance is influenced by people's subjective experiences at work. One side says that people perform better when they are happier and internally motivated by love of the work. Others assert that people do their best work under pressure and when externally

## How We Studied State of Mind

Ten years ago, we set out on a quest to understand what really happens at work. As psychologists, we were fascinated by the unexplored territory of day-to-day life inside organizations and, more specifically, inside the hearts and minds of the professionals working in those organizations. Our aim was to explore daily inner work life—the emotions, perceptions, and motivations that people experience as they react to and make sense of the events of their workdays—and how it affects performance. Our questions were basic: What affects a person's inner work life? Is there anything predictable about how it is shaped by specific events unfolding in the workday and by the organizational context? Does inner work life affect performance? We decided that the best way to get to the heart of these questions was to collect daily diaries from the people themselves.

Over a period of three years, we recruited 238 professionals from 26 project teams in seven companies and three industries to

participate in our study. Over 80% of the participants were college educated, and all of the projects required complex, creative work for successful completion. Thus, the term "knowledge workers" fits our participants well. We e-mailed diary forms to the participants every day (Monday through Friday) during the entire course of their projects, asking them each to complete the forms privately at the end of the workday. The average project length was a bit over four months, but some were as long as eight or nine months. About 75% of the forms were returned to us completed and on time, yielding nearly 12,000 individual diary reports.

The diary form had several numerical questions, asking participants to rate their own perceptions of various aspects of the work environment, their mood, and their motivation that day, as well as their own work and the team's work that day. There was also an open-ended question asking people to list the main work tasks they engaged in that day. The most important ques-

tion was also open-ended; it asked people to briefly report one event that stood out in their minds from the workday.

Although this question simply asked for an event—a concrete description of something specific that happened and who was involved—we found that, very often, people didn't stop there. They told us, sometimes in great detail, about their perceptions of the event and the thoughts that it engendered. They told us about how the event made them feel. And sometimes they told us how it affected their motivation and performance that day. These were the data that led to our primary discoveries of how constant and pervasive inner work life is and how it operates as a complex system. Together with the numerical data we collected on the diary forms and many other sources of data on the participants, the teams, the projects, and the companies, the daily diary narratives served as the basis for our conclusions about inner work life, what affects it, and how, in turn, inner work life affects performance.

motivated by deadlines and competition with peers. There is research evidence to support each of these positions.
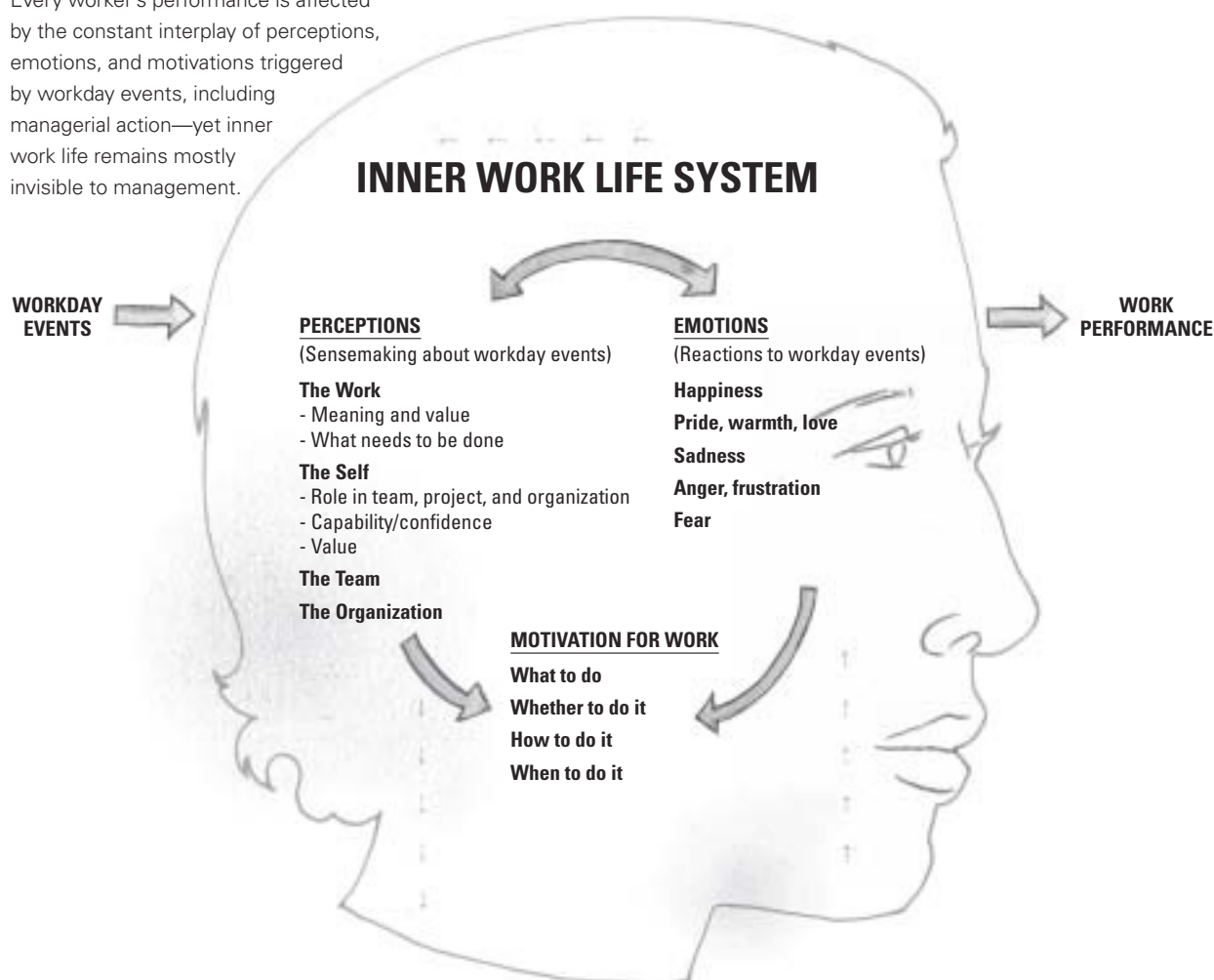
Having taken a microscope to this question, we believe strongly that performance is linked to inner work life and that the link is a positive one. People perform better when their workday experiences include more positive emotions, stronger intrinsic motivation (passion for the work), and more favorable perceptions of their work, their team, their leaders, and their organization. Moreover, these effects cannot be explained by people's different personalities or backgrounds—which we did account for in our analyses. Put simply, every moment that

they are performing their jobs, employees are "working under the influence" of their inner work lives.

So what do we mean by performance as it relates specifically to knowledge work? In settings where people must work collaboratively to solve vexing problems, high performance depends on four elements: creativity, productivity, commitment, and collegiality. We looked at each of these—using quantitative data from the monthly team ratings and the daily diary forms, as well as content analysis of the diary narratives—and mapped them against the three components of inner work life.

## Processing Work Events: What Happens Inside

Every worker's performance is affected by the constant interplay of perceptions, emotions, and motivations triggered by workday events, including managerial action—yet inner work life remains mostly invisible to management.

**INNER WORK LIFE SYSTEM**

**WORKDAY EVENTS** → **WORK PERFORMANCE**

**PERCEPTIONS**
(Sensemaking about workday events)

**The Work**
- Meaning and value
- What needs to be done

**The Self**
- Role in team, project, and organization
- Capability/confidence
- Value

**The Team**

**The Organization**

**EMOTIONS**
(Reactions to workday events)

**Happiness**
**Pride, warmth, love**
**Sadness**
**Anger, frustration**
**Fear**

**MOTIVATION FOR WORK**
**What to do**
**Whether to do it**
**How to do it**
**When to do it**

# The Reality Management Never Sees

Most managers are unclear about what is going on in their employees' inner work lives and have even less of an idea of what events affect them. Consider these diary entries by the Infomap team at DataBrook, a subsidiary of DreamSuite Hotels. (We have disguised all names and company information. We've also edited the diary entries slightly for clarity and brevity.) This nine-person team of information technologists was tapped to work on an urgent assignment, dubbed "BigDeal," that had enormous financial implications. DreamSuite was being sued for more than $145 million, and its legal department required a great deal of analysis of financial records in order to defend the company. Infomap members worked long hours throughout the eight days they had been given to complete the project, including over a holiday weekend. Yet their spirits were remarkably upbeat. What was causing such a positive outlook despite the burdensome workload and schedule?

DataBrook upper management, which generally paid little attention to Infomap, spent time in the Infomap work area, checked frequently on the project's status, held back all other demands on the team's time, and provided encouragement and support in a number of small ways. Other groups within the organization cheerfully pitched in as needed. Ellen, the project manager and team coleader—who was recovering from surgery—not only did a great deal of the actual work but also served as a liaison between the team, upper management, and the internal clients. At the project's completion, although exhausted from the final five-day (and night) sprint, the team members were happy and pleased with the experience.

Clearly, management's engagement and behavior—even seemingly trivial and routine actions—made the difference. The diary excerpts tell the tale in people's own words.

## Tuesday

I was called in to work on the BigDeal project. So DreamSuite has to go to court. So Big Deal. What about my vacation? **I'm angry about being called in. But I think I did some really good work under the pressure.** And I feel that I really supported the team. **HELEN**

## Wednesday

Today's significant team event was one that Tom and I were not involved in. Our office has been asked to produce some ad hoc data…[for the BigDeal project]. Our director, manager, and many users have been in the office all day to monitor our progress, while Ellen called Helen in from vacation to help address the problem. **While I was not involved, I've made this my event for the day because I was able to witness the extreme importance of the financial data that we handle in this office, the problem-solving capability of my team, and the supportive involvement of our immediate management.** It was a very positive experience. **CLARK**

**TEAM MEMBER IS CALLED IN FROM VACATION**

| MAY 25TH | MAY 26TH |
|---|---|

**PROJECT KICKOFF**

## Wednesday

More work today on the big DreamSuite lawsuit problem.

The boss's boss came by to offer encouragement. That was nice. He bought us bottled water! Not the cheap stuff I buy, either. **We are getting tired! Nobody's snapped yet, though. I have to admit that I love working under pressure.** HELEN

## Monday

**I believe that the sense of accomplishment we felt after interacting so greatly throughout this entire ordeal is an event in itself.**

From 05/25 through 05/30, I put in over 70 hours of work, and some other team members did the same – including Ellen, which was a constant worry for us due to her health. However, as usual, she was great. We ran into all sorts of unexpected problems and had to make all kinds of decisions. Several times, when we thought it was done, we would find a problem with the data, and sometimes almost start it all over again[.…] This involved at least 5 members of our team, who worked around the clock, giving up holidays and even vacation. **It also involved people from other teams who were willing to help us (with a smile on their faces!), and what a fantastic help it was.** Looking on the bright side of things, this not only brought our team even closer, but our efforts were noticed by several other teams and top management as well, having them here with us over the weekend for support to the point of going out of their way to bring us food. **CHESTER**

## Thursday

**Hellzapoppin'** around here the last week or so[.…] People are working crazy hours, vice presidents are a dime a dozen in our office, and wonderful Miss Ellen is doing a great job keeping us going and still finding time to make a dozen status reports a day to every one of the VPs pestering her. Short-term, it's killing our productivity, but long-term, **Ellen is getting exposure under fire to some corporate bigwigs, which will enhance her career (and ours too,** by association, I suppose). **TOM**

## Tuesday

Today my project manager attended a meeting at 9 AM to report to DreamSuite marketing the extraordinary efforts of our team over the last 5 days. We have worked 14 hours a day since last Thursday in order to attend to two major problems. The meeting went well and they commended our team effort. Today I get to go home at my normal time and work my normal hours. **The last 5 days are a blur and I am exhausted, but overall I'm feeling pretty good.** **MARSHA**

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**SENIOR MANAGEMENT VISITS PROJECT TEAM**

| MAY 27TH | MAY 31ST MEMORIAL DAY | JUNE 1ST |

**PROJECT MANAGER REPORTS TO DREAMSUITES**

**PROJECT COMPLETION**

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## Thursday

**We seem to be wearing down!** My part of the project is almost finished – Thank God! Tonight's reward from the boss's boss – more bottled water and pizza! **HELEN**

## Thursday

Today **our entire office worked like a real team again.** It was wonderful. We [...] have all worked around the clock to get a big project done. I have been here about 15 hours, but **it has been one of the best days I've had in months!!** **MARSHA**

## Monday

I have been working straight through since Friday morning with just 7 or 8 hours off for sleep…I guess that's my event. I have been here with my project manager and one other team member. **I worked 14 hours Friday, 14 hours Saturday, 14 hours Sunday, and it looks like I will be here till midnight or later tonight.** The people I have been working with are wonderful, and **even though the hours have been stressful, the atmosphere has been happy and light.** **MARSHA**

## Tuesday

Today, Ellen met with 20 to 30 people from DreamSuite Legal, DreamSuite Marketing, and DataBrook management to report the successful results of that activity. **When she returned, exhausted but happy, she told the workerbees how well they had done, and we all applauded them.** Then she went home to get some sleep. **TOM**

First, we traced the influence of positive emotion on people's creativity—that is, their ability to come up with novel and useful ideas. Many previous studies, conducted as carefully controlled laboratory experiments, have demonstrated a causal relationship between emotion—also termed "affect" or "mood"—and creativity. Our diary study, which used real-world settings and a more naturalistic approach to measuring the effect of emotion on creativity, confirms that this is not merely a laboratory phenomenon. Positive emotion was tied to higher creativity, and negative emotion was tied to lower creativity. Across all 26 teams, people were over 50% more likely to have creative ideas on the days they reported the most positive moods than they were on other days. This finding is based not on people's self-ratings of creativity but on evidence in the diary narrative that they actually did creative thinking that day.

There was even a surprising carry-over effect. The more positive a person's mood on a given day, the more creative thinking he or she did the *next* day—and, to some extent, the day after that—even taking into account the person's mood on those later days. This was clearly the experience of Marsha on the Infomap team. Of her 68 diary entries, 20 contained evidence of creative thinking. Fully 80% of those creative-thinking days followed days on which Marsha's general mood was higher than average for her. Her negative emotions on the days preceding creative-thinking days were the mirror image. Her anger was below average on 75% of the preceding days, her fear was below average on 65%, and her sadness was below average on 60% of them.

Second, we looked at how people's perceptions of their work context affected creativity. Again, our diary study adds more detailed evidence to previous research findings. People in our study were more creative when they interpreted the goings-on in their organizations in a positive light—that is, when they saw their organizations and leaders as collaborative, cooperative, open to new ideas, able to evaluate and develop new ideas fairly, clearly focused on an innovative vision, and willing to reward creative work. They were less creative when they perceived political infighting and internal competition or an aversion to new ideas or to risk taking.

Finally, we analyzed the impact of motivation, the third aspect of inner work life, on creativity. Over the past 30 years, we have garnered a great deal of research evidence supporting what we call the intrinsic motivation principle of creativity: People are more creative when they are motivated primarily by the interest, enjoyment, satisfaction, and challenge of the work itself—not by external pressures or rewards. Most of this evidence comes from laboratory experiments. When intrinsic motivation is lowered, creativity dips as well. Our diary data add to the evidence. Our study participants were more creative in their individual work on the days when they were more highly intrinsically motivated. What's more, the projects distinguished by the greatest levels of creativity overall were the ones in which team members displayed the highest intrinsic motivation in their day-to-day work.

Our findings were quite similar when we shifted our focus from creativity to the other elements of performance: productivity, commitment to the work, and collegiality (specifically, contributions to team cohesiveness). People performed better on all these fronts when they were in a good mood and worse when they were in a bad mood. Productivity, commitment, and collegiality also increased when people held positive perceptions about their work context. At a "local" level, this meant perceiving that they were supported by their team leaders and colleagues, creatively challenged by their tasks, trusted to make decisions with reasonable autonomy, and given sufficient resources and time to complete assignments. More broadly, it meant they perceived the organizational context as collaborative and open, not rife with political game playing or crippling conservatism. Finally, intrinsic motivation levels predicted performance levels across the board. People were more productive, committed, and collegial when they were more motivated—especially by the satisfactions of the work itself.

Clearly, inner work life matters to performance—how creatively people will think, how productive they will be, how much commitment they will show to their work, how collegial they will be. And many of the events that shape inner work life are caused, directly or indirectly, by managers.

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## What Good Management Does

When we ask people in business to guess which events caused by managers have the greatest influence on inner work life, they often think of interpersonal events—the kinds of person-to-person encounters where, for example, the manager praises a subordinate, works collaboratively with a subordinate as a peer, makes things more fun and relaxing, or provides emotional support. Or the opposite. These sorts of events do, indeed, have a real impact on people's perceptions, emotions, and motivations. Recall what a difference they made to the BigDeal team.

But, interestingly, our research shows that the most important managerial behaviors don't involve giving people daily pats on the back or attempting to inject lighthearted fun into the workplace. Rather, they involve two fundamental things: enabling people to move forward in their work and treating them decently as human beings.

**Enable progress.** When we compared our study participants' best days (when they were most happy, had the most positive perceptions of the workplace, and were most intrinsically motivated) with their worst days, we found that the single most important differentiator was a sense of being able to make progress in their work. Achieving a goal, accomplishing a task, or solving a problem often evoked great pleasure and sometimes elation. Even making good progress toward such goals could elicit the same reactions.

Sometimes the successes were clearly important for the project. For example, when Louise (an Infomap software engineer coding a new version of a major program) solved a problem to bring her within reach of the goal, she wrote, "I figured out why something was not working correctly. I felt relieved and happy because this was a minor milestone for me. I am 90% complete with this version of enhancements." A few weeks later, she accomplished an important step on a different programming assignment: "Yippee! I think I completed part of a project that has been a pain in the butt! I am taking reports over to the user for their viewing pleasure." But even very mundane successes led to positive feelings. For instance, a diary entry by Tom, another Infomap programmer, said, "I smashed that bug that's been frustrating me for almost a calendar week. That may not be an event to you, but I live a very drab life, so I'm all hyped." This is the kind of joy that people feel when they can simply accomplish what they need to.

Not surprisingly, there is a flip side to this effect. Across our entire database, the worst days—the most frustrating, sad, and fearful days—were characterized by setbacks in the work. Again, the magnitude of the event is not important: Even seemingly small setbacks had a substantial impact on inner work life. On April 19, Tom's failure to make measurable progress in his work cast a pall on his day: "No event today, just the continuing frustration of the week—trying to install a fairly simple change in code to an enormously complicated method of installation and production execution. Honest, you don't want to hear the details." On April 12, Louise reported being irritable about an obstacle she couldn't get around. "I changed a program today and got a syntax error….I was angry with myself."

It was clear from the diary data that being able to make progress in the work is a very big deal for inner work life. The next question, then, is which managerial behaviors affect employees' ability to do so. Our research points to several: for example, providing direct help (versus hindrance), providing adequate resources and time (versus inadequate resources or unnecessary time pressure), and reacting to successes and failures with a learning orientation (versus a purely evaluative orientation). But one of the most important managerial behaviors turns out to be the setting of clear goals. People make more progress when managers clarify where the work is heading and why it matters. In our diary study, the teams that made greater progress had more events in which the project goals and the team members' individual work goals were clear or were changed carefully and where people knew why their work mattered to the team, the organization, and the organization's customers. By contrast, teams that made less progress reported more events that muddied, confused, or haphazardly changed the goals. Sometimes those teams would be given a goal by management, only to be assigned several other tasks that conflicted with that goal. Often, those teams had a sense of futility about their work, because of uncertainty about how or even whether their efforts would make a difference.

The people on the Infomap team generally made good progress in their work—on the

*When we compared people's best days with their worst, the most important differentiator was being able to make progress in the work.*

BigDeal project and others—and it was primarily because Ellen, the project manager and one of the team's leaders, relentlessly sought clarity from the team's clients about their needs and expectations. This clarity was sometimes hard to come by, and, in those instances, progress was impeded. Consider the following example, in which a client had requested a software development project with a firm deadline but with little more than a vague sense of what the final computer program was supposed to do. Repeatedly over several days, Ellen contacted the client manager to discuss specifics. Repeatedly, she was brushed off. Marsha, to whom Ellen had assigned the project, wrote in her April 6 diary:

> We had a meeting to discuss the CRR project that I have been working on; the meeting was with just Ellen and Helen. The users have never given us written requirements for the project, and yet they just sent us a note asking if we will make the May 6 deadline. I am just forging ahead and coding like crazy…here's hoping they like what they never have asked for. Ellen is trying very hard to get them to commit themselves.

Eventually, Ellen did manage to get specifications from the client team's manager, and, with a Herculean effort, Marsha did succeed in getting the project done well and on time. But all of Marsha's hard work before the specifications were nailed down was relatively directionless and based on supposition, which impeded both real progress and her own sense of accomplishment. By contrast, during the BigDeal project, the managers who needed the work done communicated in detail with Ellen from the outset to clarify the project goals, specify their needs, and explain to everyone involved why the project was so important. Although there were many technical problems to overcome, there was no ambiguity about the goal. The effects on progress were dazzling.

Managerial events facilitating or impeding progress may be so powerful because they have multiple direct and indirect effects on performance. The direct effects are fairly obvious. For example, when goals are not articulated clearly, work proceeds in wrong directions and performance suffers. Less directly, the frustration of spinning one's wheels sours inner work life, leading to lower motivation; people facing seemingly random

*Because every employee's inner work life system is constantly operating, its effects are inescapable.*

choices will be less inspired to act on any of them. And there is a further effect. When a manager's actions impede progress, that behavior sends a strong signal. People trying to make sense of why higher-ups would not do more to facilitate progress draw their own conclusions—perhaps that their work is unimportant or that their bosses are either willfully undermining them or hopelessly incompetent.

**Manage with a human touch.** None of this emphasis on the managerial behaviors that influence progress diminishes the importance of the interpersonal managerial events that we mentioned earlier—events in which people are or are not treated decently as human beings. Although such events weren't quite as important in distinguishing the best days from the worst days, they were a close second. We frequently observed interpersonal events working in tandem with progress events. Praise without real work progress, or at least solid efforts toward progress, had little positive impact on people's inner work lives and could even arouse cynicism. On the other hand, good work progress without any recognition—or, worse, with criticism about trivial issues—could engender anger and sadness. Far and away, the best boosts to inner work life were episodes in which people knew they had done good work and managers appropriately recognized that work.

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Peter Drucker once wrote, "So much of what we call management consists of making it difficult for people to do work." The truth of this has struck us as our ongoing analyses reveal more of the negative managerial behaviors that affect inner work life. But we have also been struck by the wealth of managerial opportunities for improving inner work life. Managers' day-to-day (and moment-to-moment) behaviors matter not just because they directly facilitate or impede the work of the organization. They're also important because they affect people's inner work lives, creating ripple effects on organizational performance. When people are blocked from doing good, constructive work day by day, for instance, they form negative impressions of the organization, their coworkers, their managers, their work, and themselves; they feel frustrated and unhappy; and they become demotivated in their work. Performance suffers in the short run, and in the longer run, too.

But when managers facilitate progress, every aspect of people's inner work lives are enhanced, which leads to even greater progress. This positive spiral benefits the individual workers—and the entire organization. Because every employee's inner work life system is constantly operating, its effects are inescapable.

Discovering how inner work life affects organizational performance is clearly valuable. But as researchers we hope we have also made progress on another front. Inner work lives matter deeply to the people living them. Studies of the modern workweek show that knowledge workers today, as compared with workers of past eras, spend more time in the office and more time focused on work issues while outside the office. As the proportion of time that is claimed by work rises, inner work life becomes a bigger component of life itself. People deserve happiness. They deserve dignity and respect. When we act on that realization, it is not only good for business. It affirms our value as human beings.

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# Inner Work Life

Understanding the Subtext of Business Performance

## Further Reading

A R T I C L E S

### How to Kill Creativity
by Teresa M. Amabile
*Harvard Business Review*
May 2000
Product no. 3499

In this earlier article by Amabile, the author focuses on creativity as one of the key dimensions of employee performance. Creativity gets smothered by managers much more often than it gets supported—though not intentionally. It's the business need for coordination and control that inadvertently undermines employees' ability to put existing ideas together in new and useful ways.

To foster creativity, you need to make people's work intrinsically motivating. How? Match people with assignments and teams that stretch them and present them with diverse perspectives. Give people freedom within the company's goals—by telling them what the goals are, but encouraging them to figure out how to achieve them. And let people know that what they do matters to you and the organization.

### Building the Emotional Intelligence of Groups
by Vanessa Urch Druskat and Steven B. Wolff
*Harvard Business Review*
March 2001
Product no. 620X

The quality of people's inner work lives is also influenced by their interactions with teammates and with other groups in your organization. You can promote positive inner work lives by helping your team strengthen its emotional intelligence (EI)—that powerful combination of self-management skills and ability to relate to others.

To build group EI, help your team be aware of and constructively regulate the emotions of 1) **individual team members**—by handling confrontation productively and treating one another in a caring way, 2) **the whole group**—by creating structures that let the group express its emotions and cultivating an affirmative environment, and 3) **other key groups**—by developing cross-boundary relationships to gain outsiders' confidence and showing your appreciation of other groups.

## Harvard Business Review

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