MANAGING PEOPLE

Three Ways to Turn Setbacks into Progress

by Teresa Amabile and Steve Kramer

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People can't do their most productive, creative work unless they are highly engaged in their projects. According to the progress principle, of all the events that can keep people engaged and happy at work, the most important is simply making progress on meaningful work. The progress can be great or small, and the meaning can be as noble as trying to cure diabetes or as common as providing a useful service to a customer.

There is a dark side to the progress principle. Of all events that can destroy engagement, joy, and productivity at work, having setbacks or being stalled in the work is number one. Our research revealed that, on 76% of peoples' very best days — days in which they were happy and highly engaged — they had made some degree of progress in the work; only 13% of those best days had setbacks. By contrast, only 25% of people's worst days showed any progress, while 67% had setbacks. Even worse, the negative effect of setbacks on engagement is two-to-three times the positive effects of progress.

The obvious lesson for managers is that they should do everything in their power to support the daily progress of their workers, and reduce impediments to progress as much as possible. But there will always be setbacks. The innovative work that contemporary

organizations need for survival is often hard and complicated, so problems are inevitable. What can a manager do to keep people engaged, productive and creative when things do go wrong? **Here are three suggestions**:

First, don't treat setbacks as failures, but rather as challenges and learning opportunities. It is common wisdom that we learn from our mistakes, but too many managers seem to forget this and try to assign blame when things go wrong. Listen to the words of Alvin, one of the 238 participants who took part in our research:

"So far every solution I've developed for this project does not meet with the cost constraints. I'm becoming very frustrated with not finding the acceptable answer. Around here, not finding a solution is perceived as not being competent!"

Clearly, Alvin had a difficult problem to solve, but rather than being able to sense any forward progress, he was beaten down and made to feel incompetent. Contrast this quote from Tim, who worked for a different company with a very different attitude about setbacks:

"I showed the project manager the results I got and told him that there was a mistake in one of the trials. He said that is all right, as long as we know what we did."

In the end, Tim and his team had a stunning success, while Alvin and his team never found an acceptable answer.

Second, don't constrain the solution in advance. Be open to learning and to changing direction based on that learning. In complex, creative work, an acceptable answer cannot be specified in advance. People need the freedom to look for alternative ways of framing the problem, if they are going to take advantage of what they learn along the way.

Third, focus on small, achievable wins. If people are having regular successes, then the sting of setbacks will be less. Focusing singlemindedly on "big, hairy, audacious goals" may occasionally lead to great success, but all too often it leads audacious failures. Of the 26 teams we studied, Tim's team was the most successful and the one with the most engaged and happy people — even though its project was technically very difficult. That team reported nearly five progress events for every setback; the team leader, and his technical directors, knew how to set intermediate (and achievable) goals. In contrast, Alvin's team, which was one of the least engaged and happy, reported nearly two setbacks for every step forward. Just imagine how different the experience of working in these two teams must have been.

These three actions won't completely neutralize the negative impact that setbacks have on workers' engagement, but they will go a long way toward reducing it. More importantly, these actions can help turn today's setbacks into tomorrow's successes.

Have you ever had a setback at work that ended up leading to a breakthrough — or even to a small win? How did it happen?

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