



- The Progress Principle -

Manage Progress NOT People

As a senior executive, you may think you know what Job Number 1 is: developing a killer strategy. In fact, this is only Job 1a. You have a second, equally important task. Call it Job 1b: enabling the ongoing engagement and everyday progress of the people in the trenches of your organization who strive to execute that strategy. A multiyear research project found that of all the events that can deeply engage people in their jobs, the single most important is making progress in meaningful work.

Managers at all levels routinely—and unwittingly—undermine the meaningfulness of work for their direct subordinates through everyday words and actions. These include dismissing the importance of subordinates' work or ideas, destroying a sense of ownership by switching people off project teams before work is finalized, shifting goals so frequently that people despair that their work will ever see the light of day, and neglecting to keep subordinates up to date on changing priorities for customers.

But what about a company's most senior leaders? What is their role in making—or killing—meaning at work? To be sure, as a high-level leader, you have fewer opportunities to directly affect the inner work lives of employees than do frontline supervisors. Yet your smallest actions pack a wallop because what you say and do is intensely observed by people down the line. A sense of purpose in the work, and consistent action to reinforce it, has to come from the top.

What really sets the best managers above the rest? It's their power to build a cadre of employees who have great inner work lives—consistently positive emotions; strong motivation; and favorable perceptions of the organization, their work, and their colleagues. The worst managers undermine inner work life, often unwittingly.

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