



## The Number One Way to Stay Motivated Breakthrough Research from the Harvard Business Review

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Every January, the Harvard Business Review publishes ten breakthrough ideas for the year ahead.

Number one on this year's list was new research on what really drives motivation: A clear sense that progress is being made.

In a multi-year study, researchers at the school first asked 600 managers from dozens of different companies to rank the impact of five factors that are normally associated with motivation – recognition, incentives, support from managers and colleagues, clear goals and a sense of making progress.



In this first phase of the study, recognition for good work was ranked by managers as the most important factor in motivation.

In the next stage, hundreds of knowledge workers in a variety of settings emailed 12,000 end-of-day diaries, rating their motivation level and talking about the kind of day they had. The researchers then dug deep to look at what events those workers reported each day, especially on those days that respondents said were their “best days” and their “worst days.”

### **And the answer is.....**

A sense of progress was the factor most strongly correlated with a strong feeling of motivation. Particularly interesting – out of the five options rated by managers before the study began as keeping people motivated, that sense of making progress was rated last

Here's an excerpt from the Harvard Business Review article:

*“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.”*



Here are the five factors that appear to drive motivation the most, the events workers said they experienced on their very best days:

Making progress	76%
Collaboration	53%
Organizational support	43%
Interpersonal support	25%
Doing important work	19%

Negative events generally have a greater effect on peoples’ emotions, perceptions and motivations than positive ones, according to the researchers. And the most prominent event on workers’ worst days was experiencing a setback.

And here’s what the HBR article had to say about recognition:

*“As for recognition, 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.”*

## **Implications**

This research has some important implications on how we and the people we work with can maintain motivation levels, even in the face of the inevitable frustrations we face each day.

When it comes to the people who work with us, the study’s authors advise managers to set clear goals and to be consistent in those goals, to give staff the resources they need and to be decisive in our decision making.

There is another implication as well – and that’s to set aside the time each day to acknowledge the progress you’ve made, large or small.

This can be done by maintaining a “progress journal” on your computer – taking three minutes at the conclusion of each day to write down the top five things you’ve achieved that day.

An advisor I know prepares a list of things to do and clients to call at the beginning of each day – and draws a line through each with a yellow magic marker as they’re done. “I know it sounds silly,” she says, “but just seeing those yellow lines on that list of people to call gives me a bit of a boost.”



Along similar lines, another successful advisor starts each day with a short meeting with his four-person team. At the conclusion of that meeting, everyone identifies the three most important things they need to get done that day – even something as simple as calling an important client can be on the list, especially if that call is overdue or is likely to be difficult.

The team members take turns making notes on those items – and five minutes after the meeting ends, everyone gets an email highlighting the goals they set. Next morning's meeting starts with a review of how everyone did against those goals – and ends with people identifying their top three goals for the day ahead.

This advisor commented that two things have happened since they began doing this.

First, they've all become more focused on getting those top three things done – no one wants to be embarrassed the next morning.

And second, everyone walks away from that meeting more positive and enthused – because even after a tough day in the markets or difficult client meetings, they can still feel good about the tangible accomplishments they can point to in the last day.

As you think about how you and your team maintain motivation, include recognition and rewards in the mix .... but in the process, don't neglect the most important motivator of all – a sense that clear progress is being made each and every day.

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