

## ‘Inner Work Life’ – Article Summary

**Amabile & Kramer, HBR, May 2007**

**People experience a constant stream of emotions, perceptions and motivations as they react to and make sense of the events of the work day.**

This study aims to understand how dynamics such as emotions, perceptions and motivations affect work performance.

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

As you deal with your work day, you deal with the task at hand. You also form and adjust perceptions about the people you work with, the organisation you are part of, the work you do, and even yourself. You also experience emotions, maybe mild states of satisfaction or irritation, maybe intense feelings of pride or frustration. And these perceptions and emotions intertwine 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 complex interplay between an employee’s deeply private perceptions of what is happening around them, the emotions they experience as a result of those perceptions, and their level of motivation to do good work.

Also - 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 or more general feeling states (eg good or bad **mood**) and **motivation** – your grasp on 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 and largely unexamined by the individual experiencing it.

The 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.

### **What Gets Done When People have Good Days?**

There are two schools of thought on this – one says people perform better when are happier and internally motivated to do the work. The other says that people do best when working under pressure, and when they are externally motivated by deadlines and competition with peers.

This study strongly suggests that performance is linked to inner work life and that link is a positive one. People perform better when their workday experiences include more positive emotions, intrinsic motivation (passion for work) and more favourable perceptions of their work, work team, leaders and organisation.

## What does performance mean in the context of knowledge workers?

Creativity, productivity, commitment and collegiality.

### Creativity findings

- **Mood** has a positive correlation with creativity (and vice versa)
- It also has a carry over effect. If you are positive on a given day, you are more creative on the next day too
- **Perceptions** about work context also had a positive correlation with creativity
- People are more creative when they are **motivated** by the interest, enjoyment, satisfaction and challenge of the work itself – not by external pressures or rewards

These findings also were confirmed on the other **3 dimensions**.

At a local level, **work context** meant **perceiving** 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 **organisational context** as **collaborative and open, not rife with political game playing or crippling conservatism**.

**Intrinsic** motivation levels predicted performance levels – people were more productive, committed and collegial when they were more motivated – especially by the satisfactions of the **work itself**.

## What Good Management Does

When we think of events caused by managers have the greatest influence on our inner work life, we often think of interpersonal interactions – eg praise, working collaboratively, making things fun and relaxing, providing emotional support.

**Their research shows the two most important managerial behaviours involve:**

- **enabling progress** – enabling people to move forward in their work
- **treating them decently as human beings**

**1. Enable progress** – the single biggest differentiator b/w good and bad days was a sense of **being able to make progress in their work**. Achieving a goal, accomplishing a task, solving a problem or even making progress towards that elicited the same reactions.

Not surprisingly the flip side were characterised by set backs in work – even small ones.

**So what managerial behaviours affect an employee’s ability to make progress:**

- providing direct help
- providing adequate resources and time
- reacting to successes and failures with a learning orientation (not purely evaluative)
- One of the most important - setting clear goals. Clarifying where we are heading and why (relentlessly seeking clarity about needs and expectations. Often hard to come by and in those instances, progress can be impeded)

*If your organisation is one with ambiguity, people may need to ask if this is the right place for them if they can’t cope with this ambiguity, eg some government departments.*

**2. Manage with a human touch** – although these sort of events weren’t quite as important in distinguishing the best days from the worst days, they were a close second. Recognition of progress is essential – and it can’t be hollow. It must be specific – you must communicate the importance; what they are doing matters and why

- Praise
- working collaboratively
- making things fun and relaxing
- providing emotional support

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.

