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# How leaders kill meaning at work

**Senior executives routinely undermine creativity, productivity, and commitment by damaging the inner work lives of their employees in four avoidable ways.**

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**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 whose results we described in our recent book, *The Progress Principle*,[1] found that of all the events that can deeply engage people in their jobs, the single most important is making progress in meaningful work.

Even incremental steps forward—small wins—boost what we call "inner work life": the constant flow of emotions, motivations, and perceptions that constitute a person's reactions to the events of the work day. Beyond affecting the well-being of employees, inner work life affects the bottom line.[2] People are more creative, productive, committed, and collegial in their jobs when they have positive inner work lives. But it's not just any sort of progress in work that matters. The first, and fundamental, requirement is that the work be meaningful to the people doing it.

In our book and a recent *Harvard Business Review* article,[3] we argue that 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.[4] A sense of purpose in the work, and consistent action to reinforce it, has to come from the top.

## Four traps

To better understand the role of upper-level managers, we recently dug back into our data: nearly 12,000 daily electronic diaries from dozens of professionals working on important innovation projects at seven North American companies. We selected those entries in which diarists mentioned upper- or top-level managers—868 narratives in all.

Qualitative analysis of the narratives highlighted four traps that lie in wait for senior executives. Most of these pitfalls showed up in several companies. Six of the seven suffered from one or more of the traps, and in only a single company did leaders avoid them. The existence of this outlier suggests that it is possible for senior executives to sustain meaning consistently, but that's difficult and requires vigilance.

This article should help you determine whether you risk falling into some of these traps yourself—and unknowingly dragging your organization into the abyss with you. We also offer a few thoughts on avoiding the problems, advice inspired by the actions and words of a senior leader at the one company that did so.

We don't claim to have all the answers. But we are convinced that executives who sidestep these traps reduce their risk of inadvertently draining meaning from the work of the people in their organizations. Those leaders also will boost the odds of tapping into the motivational power of progress—something surprisingly few do.

We surveyed 669 managers at all levels of management, from dozens of companies and various industries around the world. We asked them to rank the importance of five employee motivators: incentives, recognition, clear goals, interpersonal support, and progress in the work. Only 8 percent of senior executives ranked progress as the most important motivator. Had they chosen randomly, *20 percent* would have done so. In short, our survey showed that most executives don't understand the power of progress in meaningful work.[5] And the traps revealed by the diaries suggest that most executives don't act as though progress matters. You can do better.

## Trap 1: Mediocrity signals

Most likely, your company aspires to greatness, articulating a high purpose for the organization in its corporate mission statement. But are you inadvertently signaling the opposite through your words and actions?

We saw this dynamic repeatedly at a well-known consumer products company we'll call Karpenter Corporation, which was experiencing a rapid deterioration in the inner work lives of its employees as a result of the actions of a new top-management team. Within three years of our studying Karpenter, it had become unprofitable and was acquired by a smaller rival.

Karpenter's top-management team espoused a vision of entrepreneurial cross-functional business teams. In theory, each team would operate autonomously, managing its share of the company's resources to back its own new-product innovations. During the year we collected data from Karpenter teams, the annual report was full of references to the company's innovation focus; in the first five sentences, "innovation" appeared three times.

In practice, however, those top managers were so focused on cost savings that they repeatedly negated the teams' autonomy, dictated cost reduction goals that had to be met before any other priorities were, and—as a result—drove new-product innovation into the ground. This unintended, de facto hypocrisy took its toll, as a diary excerpt from a longtime Karpenter product engineer emphasizes:

*Today I found out that our team will be concentrating on [cost savings] for the next several months instead of any new products. . . . It is getting very difficult to concentrate on removing pennies from the standard cost of an item. That is the only place that we have control over. Most of the time, quality suffers. It seems that our competition is putting out new products at a faster rate. . . . We are no longer the leader in innovation. We are the followers.*

This employee's work had begun to lose its meaning, and he wasn't alone. Many of the other 65 Karpenter professionals in our study felt that they were doing mediocre work for a mediocre company—one for which they had previously felt fierce pride. By the end of our time collecting data at Karpenter, many of these employees were completely disengaged. Some of the very best had left.

The mediocrity trap was not unique to Karpenter. We saw it revealed in different guises in several of the companies we studied. At a chemicals firm, it stemmed from the top managers' risk aversion. Consider these words from one researcher there:

*A proposal for liquid/medical filtration using our new technology was tabled for the second time by the Gate 1 committee (five directors that screen new ideas). Although we had plenty of info for this stage of the game, the committee is uncomfortable with the risk and liability. The team, and myself, are frustrated about hurdles that we don't know how to answer.*

This company's leaders also inadvertently signaled that, despite their rhetoric about being innovative and cutting edge, they were really more comfortable being ordinary.

## Trap 2: Strategic 'attention deficit disorder'

As an experienced leader, you probably scan your company's external environment constantly for guidance in making your next strategic moves. What are competitors planning? Where are new ones popping up? What's happening in the global economy, and what might the implications be for financing or future market priorities? You are probably brimming with ideas on where you'd like to take the company next. All of that is good, in theory.

In practice, we see too many top managers start and abandon initiatives so frequently that they appear to display a kind of attention deficit disorder (ADD) when it comes to strategy and tactics. They don't allow sufficient time to discover whether initiatives are working, and they communicate insufficient rationales to their employees when they make strategic shifts.

Karpenter's strategic ADD seemed to stem from its leaders' short attention span, perhaps fueled by the CEO's desire to embrace the latest management trends. The problem was evident in decisions at the level of product lines and extended all the way up to corporate strategy. If you blinked, you could miss the next strategic shift. In one employee's words:

*A quarterly product review was held with members of the [top team] and the general manager and president. Primary outcome from the meeting was a change in direction away from spray jet mops to revitalization of existing window squeegees. Four priorities were defined for product development, none of which were identified as priorities at our last quarterly update. The needle still points north, but we've turned the compass again.*

At another company we studied, strategic ADD appeared to stem from a top team warring with itself. Corporate executives spent many months trying to nail down a new market strategy. Meanwhile, different vice presidents were pushing in different directions, rendering each of the leaders incapable of giving consistent direction to their people. This wreaked havoc in the trenches. One diarist, a project manager, felt that rather than committing herself to doing something great for particular customers, she needed to hedge her bets:

*The VP gave us his opinion of which target candidates [for new products] may fit with overall company strategy—but, in reality, neither he nor anyone in our management structure knows what the strategy is. It makes this project a real balancing act—we need to go forward, but need to weigh commitments very carefully.*

If high-level leaders don't appear to have their act together on exactly where the organization should be heading, it's awfully difficult for the troops to maintain a strong sense of purpose.

### Trap 3: Corporate Keystone Kops

In the early decades of cinema, a popular series of silent-film comedies featured the Keystone Kops—fictional policemen so incompetent that they ran around in circles, mistakenly bashed each other on the head, and fumbled one case after another. The title of that series became synonymous with miscoordination. Our research found that many executives who think everything is going smoothly in the everyday workings of their organizations are blithely unaware that they preside over their own corporate version of the Keystone Kops. Some contribute to the farce through their actions, others by failing to act. At Karpenter, for example, top managers set up overly complex matrix reporting structures, repeatedly failed to hold support functions (such as purchasing and sales) accountable for coordinated action, and displayed a chronic indecisiveness that bred rushed analyses. In the words of one diarist:

*Last-minute changes continue on [an important customer's] assortments. Rather than think through the whole process and logically decide which assortments we want to show [the customer], we are instead using a shotgun approach of trying multiple assortments until we find one that works. In the meantime, we are expending a lot of time and effort on potential assortments only to find out later that an assortment has been dropped.*

Although Karpenter's example was egregious, the company was far from alone in creating chaotic situations for its workers. In one high-tech company we studied, for example, Keystone Kop–like scenarios played out around the actions of a rogue marketing function. As described in one engineer's diary, the attempts of many teams to move forward with their projects were continually thwarted by signals from marketing that conflicted with those coming from R&D and other key functions. Marketers even failed to show up for many key meetings:

*At a meeting with Pierce, Clay, and Joseph, I was told that someone from marketing would be attending our team meetings (finally). The meeting also gave me a chance to demonstrate to Joseph that we were getting mixed signals from marketing.*

When coordination and support are absent within an organization, people stop believing that they can produce something of high quality. This makes it extremely difficult to maintain a sense of purpose.

### Trap 4: Misbegotten 'big, hairy, audacious goals'

Management gurus Jim Collins and Jerry Porras encourage organizations to develop a "big, hairy, audacious goal" (BHAG, pronounced bee-hag)—a bold strategic vision statement that has powerful emotional appeal.[6] BHAGs help infuse work with meaning by articulating the goals of the organization in a way that connects emotionally with peoples' values. (Think of Google's stated mission to "organize the world's information and make it universally accessible and useful.")

At some companies, however, such statements are grandiose, containing little relevance or meaning for people in the trenches. They can be so extreme as to seem unattainable and so vague as to seem empty. The result is a meaning vacuum. Cynicism rises and drive plummets. Although we saw this trap clearly in only one of the seven companies we studied, we think it is sufficiently seductive and dangerous to warrant consideration.

That company, a chemicals firm, set a BHAG that all projects had to be *innovative blockbusters* that would yield a *minimum* of $100 million in revenue annually, within five years of a project's initiation. This goal did not infuse the work with meaning, because it had little to do with the day-to-day activities of people in the organization. It did not articulate milestones toward the goal; it did not provide for a range of experiments and outcomes to meet it; worst of all, it did not connect with anything the employees valued. Most of them wanted to provide something of value to their customers; an aggressive revenue target told them only about the value to the organization, not to the customer. Far from what Collins and Porras intended, this misbegotten BHAG was helping to destroy the employees' sense of purpose.

## Avoiding the traps

Spotting the traps from the executive suite is difficult enough; sidestepping them is harder still—and wasn't the focus of our research. Nonetheless, it's instructive to look at the one company in our study that avoided the traps, a creator of coated fabrics for weatherproof clothing and other applications. We recently interviewed its head, whom we'll call Mark Hamilton. That conversation generated a few ideas that we hope will spark a lively discussion in your own C-suite. For example:

*When you communicate with employees, do you provide strategic clarity that's consistent with your organization's capabilities and an understanding of where it can add the most value?* Hamilton and his top team believed that innovating in processes, rather than products, was the key to creating the right combination of quality and value for customers. So he talked about process innovation at every all-company meeting, and he steadfastly supported it throughout the organization. This consistency helped everyone understand the strategy and even become jazzed about it.

*Can you keep sight of the individual employee's perspective?* The best executives we studied internalize their early experiences and use them as reference points for gauging the signals that their own behavior will send to the troops. "Try hard to remember when you were working in the trenches," Hamilton says. "If somebody asked you to do a bunch of work on something they hadn't thought through, how meaningful could it be for you? How committed could you be?"

*Do you have any early-warning systems that indicate when your view from the top doesn't match the reality on the ground?* Regular audits to gauge the effectiveness of coordination and support processes in areas such as marketing, sales, and purchasing can highlight pain points that demand senior management's attention because they are starting to sap meaning from your people's work. In Hamilton's view, senior executives bear the responsibility for identifying and clearing away systemic impediments that prevent quality work from getting done.

Hamilton's company was doing very well. But we believe that senior executives can provide a sense of purpose and progress even in bad economic times. Consider the situation that then–newly appointed Xerox head Anne Mulcahy faced in 2000, when the company verged on bankruptcy. Mulcahy refused her advisers' recommendation to file for bankruptcy (unless all other options were exhausted) because of the demoralizing signal it would send to frontline employees. "What we have going for us," she said, "is that our people believe we are in a war that we can win."[7] She was right, and her conviction helped carry Xerox through four years of arduous struggle to later success.

As an executive, you are in a better position than anyone to identify and articulate the higher purpose of what people do within your organization. Make that purpose real, support its achievement through consistent everyday actions, and you will create the meaning that motivates people toward greatness. Along the way, you may find greater meaning in your own work as a leader.

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**Notes**

1 Teresa Amabile and Steven Kramer, *The Progress Principle: Using Small Wins to Ignite Joy, Engagement, and Creativity at Work*, Boston, Massachusetts: Harvard Business Review Press, August 2011.

2 See Sangeeta Agrawal, James W. Asplund, James K. Harter, Emily A. Killham, and Frank L. Schmidt, "Causal impact of employee work perceptions on the bottom line of organizations," *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, July 2010, Volume 5, Number 4, pp. 378–89.

3 See Teresa Amabile and Steven Kramer, "The power of small wins," *Harvard Business Review*, May 2011, Volume 89, Number 5, pp. 70–80.

4 See Robert Sutton, *Good Boss, Bad Boss: How to Be the Best . . . and Learn from the Worst*, New York: Business Plus, 2010; and Sutton's related article, "Why good bosses tune in to their people," mckinseyquarterly.com, August 2010.

5 Lower-level managers were even less likely to recognize the power of progress: only 5 percent of all survey respondents ranked it first among the five factors we asked about.

6 See James C. Collins and Jerry I. Porras, "Building your company's vision," *Harvard Business Review*, September/October 1996, Volume 74, Number 5, pp. 65–77.

7 William W. George and Andrew N. McLean, "Anne Mulcahy: Leading Xerox through the perfect storm (A)," Harvard Business School Case 9-405-050, January 2005.