

A Brief Introduction to the Progress-Focused Approach

A Guide for Managers, Coaches,
Teachers, and Students

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“The greater part of progress is the desire to progress”
~ Seneca (Epistulae Morales ad Lucilium 71, 36)

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1. Introduction

It surely became a day of meaningful progress. In 2011, while we were conducting a training course, Gwenda Schlundt Bodien and I were standing in front of a flipchart stand. We had been searching for a fitting name for what we had been developing for some years at that point. And we were attempting to do so by writing names on flipcharts. The name we had been using was ‘solution-focused’, following the work by Insoo Kim Berg and Steve de Shazer and their colleagues¹. In the 1980s, they and their team had developed a pragmatic and positive psychotherapy approach which had gradually been adopted by coaches, trainers and managers. We were among the first non-therapists who had adopted the approach. But by now, ‘solution-focused’ did not fit our work well anymore.

Progress-focused

Although we still used quite a few principles and techniques which once emerged out of the solution-focused approach – scaling questions, previous success questions and desired situation questions – we had started to diverge more and more from what the solution-focused approach entailed. There were two main reasons for this. One was that we had invented all kinds of ideas and interventions ourselves, the other, probably more importantly, was that we had started to rely more and more on findings from the science of psychology. Most notably, we had been influenced by the work of Carol Dweck on mindsets and the work by Richard Ryan and Edward Deci on motivation.

¹ e.g. De Shazer (1988)

Suddenly, while we were standing in front of that flipchart, the name ‘progress-focused’ appeared. It did not take us long to recognize that this was the name we had been looking for. We adopted it and started developing our approach. We defined the progress-focused approach as a collection of principles and techniques which help individuals and teams to make achieved and desired progress visible and to get ideas about next steps forward. Between the two of us we wrote hundreds of articles in the years that followed and more than 10 books².

Bridging two gaps

We try to bridge two kinds of gaps in the progress-focused approach: the gap between theory and practice and the gap between different theories. Our motivation to bridge the gap between theory and practice is that it is our conviction that scientific psychological theory can be useful in practically everything we do. Our view is that all our activities have a psychological component to them. The more effectively we deal with this all-present psychological component, the greater the chance of achieving meaningful progress. Unfortunately, only a minority of the people are acquainted with some of the more robust knowledge which has been brought forward by psychology. We try to bridge the gap between theory and practice by describing theory in accessible ways.

The second type of gap we aim to bridge is the one between different psychological theories. Many psychological scholars produce (mini)theories which they then keep building on. What they seem less inclined to do is to build bridges between

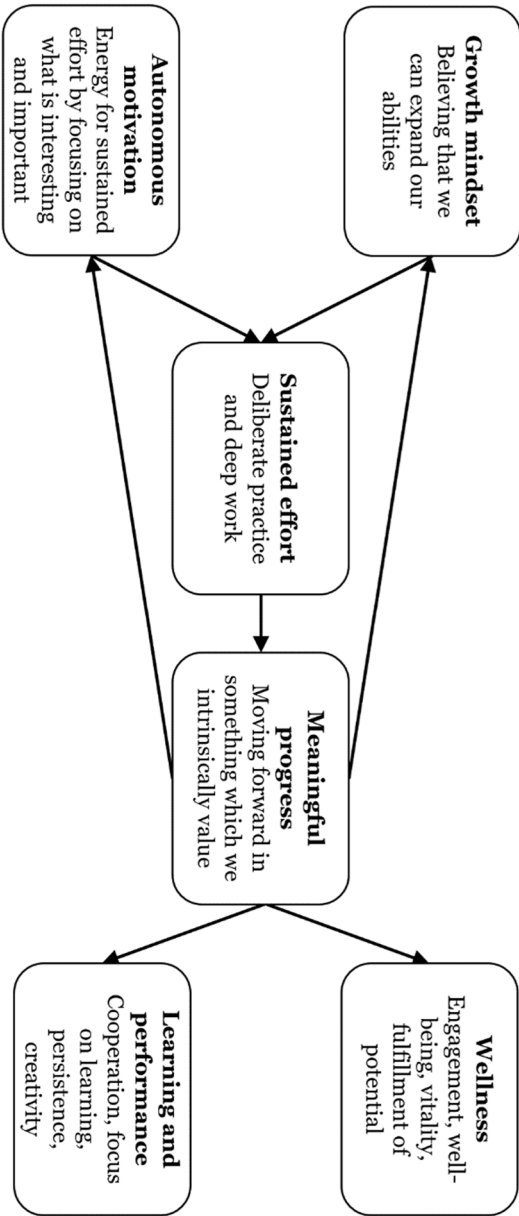
² One of those is *Creating Progress* by Gwenda Schlundt Bodien

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their own theories and those generated by others. Psychologist Walter Mischel (2008), broadly known for his *marshmallow effect*, once noted: “Psychologists treat other peoples’ theories like toothbrushes — no self-respecting person wants to use anyone else’s.” He realized that, in order to build a cumulative science of psychology it would be necessary to build bridges.

Basic model

One way to understand the progress-focused approach is through the picture below. The diagram is perhaps most easily understood if we view it from right to left. On the right there are two boxes representing *wellness* and *learning and performance*. Wellness is a term to describe flourishing as a person. Part of it is feeling happy but it is more than that. It also functioning optimally. Learning and performance refers to expanding your skills and knowledge but also to producing valuable outcomes. One box to the left we find *meaningful progress*. This is moving forward in what we find intrinsically valuable. As we will see in the book, making meaningful progress can indeed be a precursor to wellness, learning and performance. One more box to the left, we find a factor that is necessary for meaningful progress: *sustained effort*. When thinking about effort, we distinguish between the learning zone and the performance zone. While in the learning zone, we focus on deliberate practice. This is a highly effortful and effective technique for expanding one’s skills. While in the performance zone, we focus on doing the best we can to be productive. Deep work, a deeply focused way of working, is an important way to achieve this. All these terms will be explained in more detail, later.



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Moving to the left side of the diagram, we see two boxes: *growth mindset* and *autonomous motivation*. The growth mindset refers to the work by Carol Dweck and her colleagues. They found that a growth mindset, the belief that we can expand our abilities, is highly beneficial and an important enabler of sustained effort. Autonomous motivation is a concept from the self-determination theory, the most prominent motivation theory within psychology today. Being autonomously motivated means that we endorse what we are doing because we either find it interesting or valuable. Being autonomously motivated is like a power plant enabling you to put in effort and persist. Besides that, it contributes to your wellness, learning and performance.

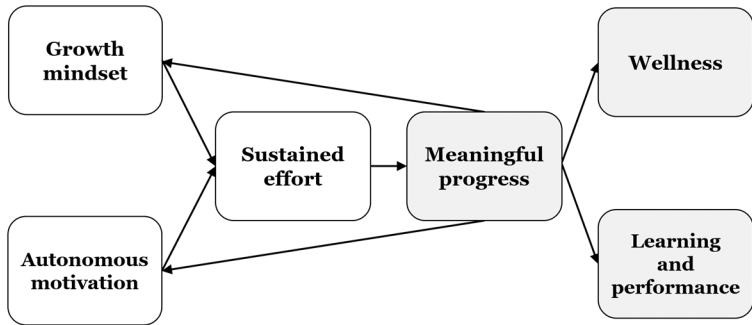
Aim of the book

All the above and more is explained in the book. We will alternate between chapters which are practical and chapters which lean more toward theory. It is my perception that the progress-focused approach has been very useful to our clients. On top of that, it has made our own work exciting and fulfilling.

This brief introduction to the principles and techniques of the progress-focused approach was primarily intended to provide our course participants a bit of background to our highly practical training programs. If you are one of them, I hope that you will discover some interesting and useful things. To anyone else who happened to get their hands on the book, I wish the same.

Coert Visser
Driebergen, 2020

2. Meaningful progress



The progress-focused approach is all about making already achieved progress visible, defining further desired progress, and helping individuals and teams with identifying and taking small steps forward. A focus on meaningful progress can make many things in life and work better. Here is what we mean by the term ‘meaningful progress’.

Meaningful progress: moving forward in something which we intrinsically value. In other words, something that fits with our own deeply held values, in what we find important in life and in which we deeply believe.

The continued desire for further progress

No matter where we currently stand, people will always keep desiring for further meaningful progress. A factor that plays an important role in our continued need for meaningful progress is that our brain automatically and continuously registers how well we feel (this process is called ‘interoception’; see Feldman Barret, 2017). We feel good in

certain circumstances, bad in others. When we do certain things, we feel good. When we do other things, we feel bad. Because we prefer to feel good rather than bad, we will always look for ways to be able to feel good rather than bad. Three basic ways in which we can do that are: changing ourselves, changing the situations we find ourselves in, and seeking out different situations. In these ways, we may make progress. Yet, the process of interoception will keep going, also in these new and improved circumstances. As a result, over time, we will again distinguish between aspects that appeal to us and aspects that appeal less to us. As soon as this happens, a new desire for further progress emerges. And so it goes on.

The progress principle

Meaningful progress turns out to be one of the most motivating things we can experience in our work and daily life. This has been demonstrated in research by, among others, Amabile & Kramer (2011). They discovered that employees who felt that they had made meaningful progress had a more positive *inner work life*. This means that they thought more positively about their work, they felt better in their work, and they were better motivated for their work. In addition to this, they were more creative and cooperated better. Amabile and Kramer dubbed this phenomenon the ‘progress principle’. What was interesting, was that the meaningful progress did not need to be large. Even small meaningful progress could make a working day into a fulfilling one. The authors called this ‘the power of small wins’.

Other research has also pointed to the benefits of making progress. Schunk & Usher (2012) found that the perception of

The psychology of progress

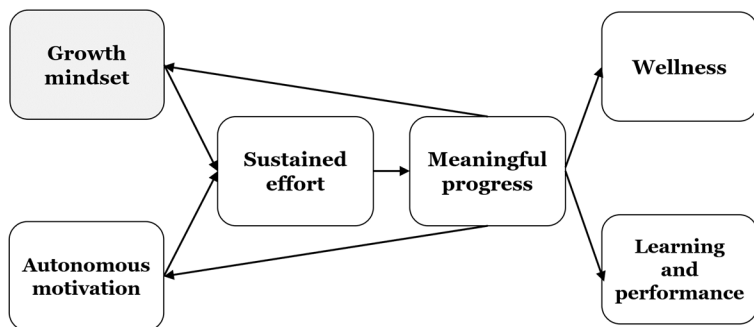
progress reinforces your feeling that you are up to your task and your motivation to continue. MacLeod, et al. (2008) and Street, et al. (2007) found that our physical and mental well-being is also supported by making meaningful progress. Elliot, et al. (1997) showed that the benefits of meaningful progress also happen in our personal lives. Especially progress that contributes to the fulfillment of our basic needs for autonomy, competence and connectedness contributes to a sense of satisfaction and meaning in our lives. We will get back to that topic in chapter 7 about autonomous motivation.

Achieving progress or reaching goals?

For decades, psychologists have been doing research into happiness, which they generally refer to as 'subjective well-being' (SWB). A pioneer in this field of research, Ed Diener (1984), soon noticed that there is a relationship between progress and happiness. He said, "People respond positively when they make progress toward goals and they respond negatively when they fail to achieve goals."

Research has indeed shown that the pursuit of personal goals is related to subjective well-being (Brunstein, 1993; Cantor & Sanderson, 1999; Emmons, 1986) particularly when it comes to goals which are important to the person (Freund & Baltes, 2002). And not only the pursuit of goals is related to subjective well-being, but also the progress toward those goals and the achievement of those goals (Wiese, 2007). But subjective well-being after the achievement of goals can quickly fade away and leave one with a feeling of emptiness. There are indications that the degree of progress towards the goal is more important for subjective well-being than the achievement of goals (Hsee & Abelson, 1991).

4. The growth mindset



Sophia has started a study in which mathematics is an important subject. She finds math difficult and explains that sometimes she only manages to pass exams by mindlessly memorizing the steps of solving certain math problems. Actually, she doesn't understand at all what she is doing and she confesses to her teacher that she thinks she will never acquire any real insight into math. The next few years, she continues to work hard at it. She does all her homework, checks her answers, and asks for help whenever she gets stuck. Two years later, she still finds math rather difficult. But to her surprise, she has noticed that she now quite easily understands the things she did not get at all during her first year. Although she would never have expected it to happen, her insight apparently has grown. She even begins to wonder what she once found so difficult about those assignments.

How we think about the malleability of our abilities appears to be more important than you might think. Psychologist Carol Dweck has been studying this topic since the 1970s (Dweck, 2006). She distinguishes two broad ways of thinking

The growth mindset

about this question. The first, which she calls a ‘fixed mindset’, comes down to the belief that our abilities are more or less unchangeable. The second way, which she calls a ‘growth mindset’, is the belief that we can develop our abilities by putting in focused and sustained effort. These two ways of thinking can probably be found in each person. At certain moments we might lean a bit more to a fixed mindset while at other times we might lean more to a growth mindset. Also, we might have more of a fixed mindset regarding certain abilities while having more of a growth mindset regarding other abilities.

Consequences of mindsets

What research has shown is that different mindsets are associated with different consequences. Here are a few examples of studies. Burnette, et al. (2012) did a meta-analysis on 113 studies. This meta-analysis revealed that people with growth mindsets show more goal-oriented behaviors which are associated with performance. A second meta-analysis, by Lazowski & Hulleman (2016), combined 74 studies in the educational context. This study showed that mindset interventions aimed at eliciting a growth mindset, help to improve academic performance. Claro, et al. (2016) studied high school students in Chili and found that the effect of mindset of students on academic achievement is about equal to the effect of their social-economic background. A large-scale study by Yeager et al. (2019) studied the effects of a brief growth mindset intervention in American high school students. This brief intervention reduced a fixed mindset in lower performing students. Also, the growth mindset intervention predicted a rise in students’ grades. Finally, the

intervention increased the likelihood that students would take a challenging course in the next school year.

So, what precisely are the differences that happen with different mindsets? Firstly, we tend to set different types of goals. In a fixed mindset, we tend to focus on ability goals, goals whose achievement hopefully makes us look smart. In a growth mindset we tend to set learning goals. Secondly, the two mindsets predict different ways of dealing with difficulty and setbacks. In a fixed mindset, we tend to think that difficulties and failures define us. We view them as signs of a lack of abilities. When something is very hard, we are probably just not talented in that area, we think. Often, this leads to us avoiding that activity. We'd rather move on to something which we are good at. In a growth mindset, we interpret difficulties and mistakes as a sign that we are doing something hard and we are in the process of learning something new. We see difficulties and setbacks as a sign that we may have to put in more effort, change our approach or ask for help. Our engagement in the activity does not suffer. The picture below summarizes these differences.

Mindset	→	Types of goals	→	Attribution after failure	→	Emotional response	→	Behavioral response
Fixed mindset	→	Ability goals	→	Ability attribution	→	Loss of interest, shame	→	Giving up, hiding mistakes
Growth-mindset	→	Learning goals	→	Effort attribution	→	Sustained interest	→	Persisting, changing strategy

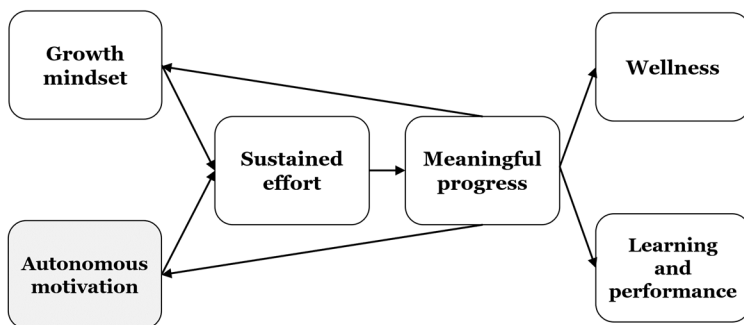
How can we elicit a growth mindset?

We don't have to be prisoners of our fixed mindset. Mindsets are constantly influenced by what happens to us and around us. What we say to ourselves and what others say to us can quickly affect our mindset. This can happen in either direction. Given the beneficial characteristics of a growth mindset relative to a fixed mindset, it is interesting to learn how we can elicit a growth mindset and keep from prompting a fixed mindset. Next, we will look at some specific things we can do to affect mindsets.

Normalizing means that you show understanding when the person you are dealing with expresses frustration about failures or setbacks. You may do this by saying, "It is normal to find this difficult because it indeed is a difficult topic." By saying something like this, the person will be slightly less inclined to attribute the difficulty to a lack of ability. Instead the person can view the difficulty of the task as a logical explanation for it. This increases the chance that he or she will keep trying.

Create positive expectations means that, through the things you say, you influence the person's expectation in a positive direction. If they say, "I can't do it. It is too hard for me", you might respond by saying, "You did not succeed, yet? Can I help you?" The simple addition of the word 'yet' implies that the person will eventually succeed. There are more ways of eliciting a positive expectation. For example, a teacher might say, "This topic is challenging but my experience is that anyone will eventually be able to understand it. If you put in the effort, you can do it."

7. Autonomous motivation



Case: A health care organization has recently introduced self-managing teams with the aim of giving employees as much autonomy as possible. The job name of *team leader* has been changed to *team coach* to illustrate that the organization wants to get rid of the 'old-fashioned hierarchical way of leadership'. Team coaches must be only servant and supportive. The hope is that these changes will benefit both the well-being of the team members and the clients of the organization. Over time, the management team evaluates working with the self-managing teams. There appears to be a lot of discontent. Many people in the teams complain about this new way of working. They say they are left to their own devices. They complain about too much workload and blame management for being unclear and absent. One of the MT members suggests that "apparently there can be such a thing as too much autonomy". Others reluctantly support this notion. They are inclined to reverse the changes and to fall back on the old way of working.

Motivation is essential for learning and performing. What is motivation? Briefly, it is energy for action. It is about the reasons you have for doing things. There was a time when

many parents, psychologists, and managers, thought that motivation needs to be put into people. Punishment and rewards were seen as important ways to do that. This was based on the simple assumption that people would only start to move into action in response to external influences. If there were no external influences such as rewards and punishment, people would be inactive. Modern motivation theories assume that this way of thinking about motivation is incorrect. Nowadays, people are seen as naturally active and investigative. Motivation does not have to be put into us, it is already there. The trick is to support existing sources of motivation.

Self-determination theory

Nowadays, the most influential motivation theory is self-determination theory (SDT, Ryan & Deci, 2017). The theory was originally developed by Richard Ryan and Edward Deci but is now researched, refined and expanded by many researchers around the world. SDT assumes that people, like other organisms, have the innate potential to flourish. People come to fruition through an innate development process, called organismic integration, that consists of two parts. The first part is a process of growth, the second is a process of integration. The process of growth is the expansion of our physical structures (our bodies become larger) and our psychological structures. In other words, the total of our beliefs, values, knowledge and capacities becomes more extensive. These processes of growth imply an increase in the complexity of our brain during our lifetime. This does not have to lead to confusion or a loss of overview because at the same time a process of integration takes place. This process

of integration is a process whereby all our new impressions, knowledge, experiences, and the like, are brought together in such a way that we can continue to maintain a coherent view of ourselves and our relationship with the world around us. The process of integration means that we remain able to function coherently.

Intrinsic motivation and internalization

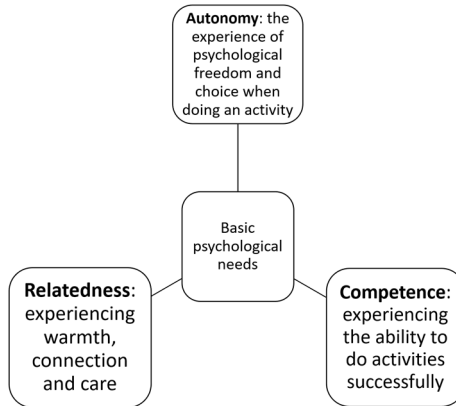
These processes of growth and integration can only go well if our needs for autonomy, competence and relatedness are supported in the environment in which we grow up and live. This is done by two known processes. The first process is to follow our intrinsic motivation. This process, in which we do what we find enjoyable and interesting, increases our knowledge about the world and our competence. The second process is the process of internalizing the values and expectations of the environment in which we develop. This process leads us to view the things that are expected of us as important. This allows us to fully support making choices that are consistent with these values.

3 Basic psychological needs

Within SDT it is thus assumed that we all have three basic psychological needs (Vansteenkiste, et al., 2020), the needs for autonomy, competence and relatedness (see the diagram on the next page). These three needs are innate and universal. They are present throughout our entire lives and in people from all cultures. The extent to which these needs are satisfied determines how well we feel and function. Having basic needs satisfied is important for all people regardless of whether we are aware of their importance and it forms the basis for our

Autonomous motivation

continued psychological growth. They are therefore not subjective needs but objective needs.



The need for autonomy may be supported by things such as offering meaningful choices, taking people's views seriously and encouraging self-initiative. The need for competence may be supported by things such as offering clear structures and constructive feedback. The need for relatedness may be supported by things like showing personal interest and care in people. By the way, all three needs are essential. They do influence each other and are interrelated. People sometimes wonder if the need for autonomy is not at odds with the need for relatedness, but this is not the case. In SDT, autonomy does not mean independence. It means that you can choose to do what you yourself endorse. Normally, we will gladly choose to do things together with other people and engage in interdependent relationships. If the need for autonomy is satisfied, the need for connectedness is thus usually also satisfied. It is also not the case that these basic needs only