OPINION

We should be celebrating a lot more at work

MERGE GUPTA-SUNDERJI
SPECIAL TO THE GLOBE AND MAIL
PUBLISHED JULY 25, 2025
FOR SUBSCRIBERS

Interested in more careers-related content? Check out our new weekly Work Life newsletter. Sent every Monday afternoon.

A routine project wraps up on time, under budget and with solid results. But instead of celebrating, the team just shrugs and moves on to the next project. No one says, "Well done." No one names what worked. And the momentum that could've carried into the next challenge fizzles. This scenario isn't as uncommon as you think.

We often wait for the big wins – the major deal, the successful launch, the high-profile initiative – before recognizing people's efforts. But most work isn't made up of breakthroughs. It is built in steps, in course corrections, in the invisible persistence that keeps things moving. That's where micro-achievements come in. When we notice and name those small moments of progress, we activate something powerful, not just for motivation, but for culture.

Why micro-achievements matter

What really drives this? At its core, it is brain chemistry. When people feel a sense of progress, even from a small step forward, the brain releases dopamine, the same feel-good chemical tied to reward and motivation. It is not the size of the success that matters, it is the recognition that something meaningful has moved ahead. The quick email update sent, the problem-solving conversation, the rough draft finished – each one creates a little hit of satisfaction that fuels momentum. And when momentum builds, so does morale. Whether you're leading a team or collaborating with peers, calling out these small wins can keep everyone moving in the right direction. In short, micro-achievements aren't just personal boosts, they're cultural fuel.

Small wins may begin with individuals, but when they're noticed, named and shared, they shape how work feels for everyone. Recognizing micro-achievements, whether one-on-one, across a team or even between peers, builds energy and reinforces a culture where progress is visible, valued and motivating.

Here are seven practical ways **leaders can** make that happen:

1. **Acknowledge visible progress in the moment:** When someone gets something moving

1. **Acknowledge visible progress in the moment:** When someone gets something moving, sends the tricky e-mail, wraps up the first draft, handles a hard conversation, say something. A quick "Nice work pushing that forward" or "That took focus, well done" makes people feel seen. It signals that progress counts, not just outcomes.
2. **Make micro-recognition a shared habit:** In team meetings, try asking "What's one small thing you moved forward this week?" Or wrap up the meeting with a round of "quick wins." These prompts normalize celebrating motion, not just milestones. Over time, they nudge your team and your co-workers toward a rhythm where progress is part of the conversation.
3. **Encourage peer-to-peer shout-outs:** Recognition doesn't have to come from the top. If a colleague solves a problem, offers support or just keeps things moving, say something. Try "Thanks for staying on top of that, it helped the rest of us" or "I noticed that fix you made." These little moments build trust and shared momentum.
4. **Track the small steps visibly:** Whether it is a shared board, a Slack thread or a whiteboard list, keep a informal log of small wins. Glancing back, especially during tough stretches, helps people remember that real progress has been happening all along.
5. **Reinforce the behaviour, not just the result:** When recognizing micro-achievements, don't just praise the outcome. Highlight the effort, curiosity or follow-through behind it. "You really stuck with that despite the obstacles" or "I liked how you tested a different approach" reinforces what you want more of. This kind of feedback strengthens motivation across the team.
6. **Celebrate starts, not just finishes:** Too often, we wait to applaud only the end result. But calling out the courage it takes to begin – whether it is speaking up in a meeting, starting a challenging task or proposing a new idea – reinforces a growth mindset and encourages others to step forward too.
7. **Use small wins to spark conversations:** Micro-achievements can be great entry points for connection. Instead of asking, "How's it going?" try: "What's something you made progress on this week?" It opens the door to meaningful dialogue and keeps momentum top of mind.

Recognizing micro-achievements isn't just about boosting morale, it is about building momentum. When people feel their progress is seen, they're more likely to stay engaged, push through challenges and contribute with energy. Small wins send a powerful message: what you're doing matters and it is making a difference. Whether you're a leader, a colleague or a teammate, paying attention to these moments fuels motivation and strengthens culture. In the long run, it is not just the big victories that shape a workplace, it is the steady rhythm of small ones.

Merge Gupta-Sunderji is a speaker, author, mentor to senior leaders, and the chief executive officer of the leadership development consultancy Turning Managers Into Leaders.

Sign up for our new Business Brief newsletter. A daily look at the most important business