

POWER UP: The Science of Micro-Interventions to Drive High Performance



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Article Summary:

This article discusses the concept of **micro-interventions, small, intentional actions that help individuals and teams** overcome obstacles, regain focus, and build momentum in high-pressure work environments. Rooted in research from positive psychology and organizational behavior, micro-interventions are designed to create quick, positive shifts in mindset, engagement, and motivation. While not a cure-all, these simple actions, when practiced regularly, can lead to significant, lasting improvements in both individual and team performance by fostering positive psychological capital and generating sustained momentum.

The article outlines five micro-interventions: the pomodoro technique, emotional pause, gratitude practice, starting with "why," and minding the magic ratio. Each of these can help individuals and teams boost focus, emotional resilience, and drive positive momentum in the workplace.



Micro-interventions are the power-ups of the workplace, offering small but mighty boosts that can elevate performance and spark success. What makes micro-interventions so powerful is their ability to drive team success in a way that feels seamless and sustainable.

In today's fast-paced, high-pressure work environments, staying engaged and moving forward can sometimes feel like an uphill battle. Teams often get stuck in cycles of indecision or conflict, and individuals may struggle to maintain focus amid the demands of endless tasks and shifting priorities. But what if there was a way to break free from this stagnation and generate momentum without requiring a complete overhaul of processes or systems?

Enter micro-interventions! Micro-interventions are small, intentional actions that can help individuals and teams regain focus, overcome obstacles, and reignite their energy. They're not just trendy self-help gimmicks; they're rooted in science, with research from fields like positive psychology and organizational behavior supporting their effectiveness. Think of them as power-ups for the workplace, quick, effective boosts that can shift mindsets, improve engagement, and create the kind of positive momentum that leads to sustained progress.

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Much like the glowing power-ups in Super Mario Bros., whether it's a Super Mushroom for growth, a Fire Flower to spark action, or a Starman for invincibility, micro-interventions can turn a challenging situation into a productive one. These small boosts are all about creating movement, breaking free from inertia, and pushing teams and individuals toward their goals with renewed purpose.

In this article, we'll explore the science behind micro-interventions and how they can help transform the way we approach daily challenges at work. We'll also give you several micro-interventions to add to your power-up reserve, so you'll be ready to implement them when challenges arise. So, grab your metaphorical controller and let's dive in and explore how these small actions can help you level up your work life.

THE SCIENCE OF MICRO-INTERVENTIONS

Researchers define micro-interventions as small, intentional activities that focus on cultivating positive outcomes quickly and independently. They don't require a coach or hours of training to get started; a small prompt or reminder might be all that is needed. Interventions, such as reflection exercises, work by activating positive mood or attitudes or enhancing meaningfulness through positive experiences.

Humans are naturally wired to focus on the negative - we pay attention to threats to avoid harm, solve problems, and meet needs. Obviously, positive feelings are also a part of the human experience, but they are fleeting and often lack depth (think instant gratification vs savoring moments of wonder or heartfelt expression). Micro-interventions work by increasing positive experiences in our lives in general, and by setting the stage for upward spirals. The practice and experience of positivity invite more positive moods and resources into one's life. Other interventions work by enhancing individuals "positive psychological capital." This includes honing skills and mindsets like resilience, optimism, self-efficacy, gratefulness, and mindfulness.

Micro-interventions are not a cure-all. They can't fix systemic problems, a toxic culture, or a flawed strategy. What they can do is provide small bursts of momentum to help navigate challenges and inspire forward movement within a functional system.

Practicing these helps diminish reactivity, broaden thinking, and enhance perspective taking, bringing into the field of view new ways of looking at things and thus multiplying solutions and opportunities. This shift in approach boosts confidence and motivation because individuals learn to expect to overcome challenges and be successful in their endeavors.

Micro-interventions are effective precisely because of their simplicity and ease of implementation. Small steps such as practicing gratitude, reframing a challenge, or setting aside time for focused work, can have a significant impact on individuals and teams.



What's particularly compelling about these interventions is that they're easy to adopt and require minimal resources. While they may not lead to long-term transformation on their own, they can spark bigger, more sustained changes. For maximum effectiveness, regular practice of these interventions is key: the more consistently individuals engage in them, the stronger the positive effects. Micro-interventions can mean large-size, lasting impact through manageable, bite-sized changes.

Micro-interventions work by increasing positive experiences in our lives in general, and by setting the stage for upward spirals.

However, it's important to note that micro-interventions, much like Mario's power-ups, are not a cure-all. They can't fix systemic problems, a toxic culture, or a flawed strategy. What they can do is provide small bursts of momentum to help navigate challenges and inspire forward movement within a functional system. Like Mario's power-ups, these interventions aren't the final solution but rather the spark that helps us level up. By stacking these micro-moments, individuals and teams can create ripple effects of positivity and progress, ultimately leading to better performance and more fulfilling work. Just like in the game, having the right power-ups ready when challenges arise can turn tough spots into opportunities. Let's explore a collection of our favorite micro-interventions to help you power up when it matters most.

A MICRO-INTERVENTION TOOLKIT FOR IMPROVING PERFORMANCE

1. THE POMODORO TECHNIQUE

Procrastination and distraction are common challenges in the modern workplace, often hindering productivity and progress. One effective micro-intervention to combat this is the Pomodoro Technique, a time management method developed by Francesco Cirillo in the late 1980s. Cirillo's method involves breaking work into intervals, traditionally 25 minutes of focused activity followed by a 5-minute break. After completing four such intervals, a longer break of 15 to 20 minutes is taken. This structured approach aims to enhance focus, reduce mental fatigue, and improve overall efficiency.

Humans are limited in focus capacity. Most of us incorrectly believe we are capable of multitasking effectively, but research doesn't support those beliefs. Our brains actually lack the neural framework to perform two tasks at the same time. When we think we are multitasking, we are usually just switching attention quickly from one task to the other. While it may feel like the tasks are happening simultaneously, they are not. The short switch from one to another actually slows us down and creates inefficiency. Researchers call this a switch cost, or a reduction in performance accuracy or speed that results from switching tasks.

In his book, Hyperfocus, Chris Bailey describes "attentional space" as the amount of mental capacity we have to focus on things. When we are doing habitual tasks, making our coffee in the morning, folding laundry, or even checking new email at work, the repetitive nature of these tasks creates a lighter mental load and less of our attentional space is required.

However, most of the important work tasks we do today are not habitual, but rather complex and new. As we add complex and novel tasks into our attentional space, they take up more area and require more of our conscious focus to complete.

The Pomodoro Technique provides the structure needed for this focused work through the timed intervals. The short burst of focused activity helps us power through tasks with heightened efficiency. Pomodoro's scheduled breaks also ensure sustained productivity by preventing burnout. A study examining break-taking strategies found that predetermined, systematic breaks not only improved mood but also enhanced efficiency, allowing for similar task completion in shorter time frames compared to self-regulated breaks. This cyclical approach mirrors the balance of effort and recovery that research has shown to optimize cognitive performance and task completion.

How to Implement the Pomodoro Technique:

1. **Choose a Task:** Select a specific task you intend to work on.
2. **Set a Timer:** Set a timer for 25 minutes, the standard duration for one Pomodoro interval.
3. **Work Intensively:** Focus solely on the chosen task for the entire 25 minutes, avoiding all distractions.
4. **Take a Short Break:** After the timer goes off, take a 5-minute break to relax and rejuvenate.
5. **Repeat the Cycle:** After completing four Pomodoro intervals, take a longer break of 15 to 20 minutes before resuming work.

Team Tip: Teams can adopt the Pomodoro Technique by synchronizing work intervals and break times. This collective approach ensures that all team members are aligned in their work rhythms.

2. THE PAUSE

The pause is a simple yet profound tool for building emotional agility. Emotional agility, a term coined by psychologist Susan David, is the ability to be flexible with your emotions, acknowledging them without being controlled by them.

Emotional agility is a key component of emotional intelligence, and the pause is a great way to start your EI journey by creating space between an emotional trigger and our automatic response.

Do you remember the Tanooki Suit in Super Mario Bros? It gave Mario the ability to temporarily turn into a statue, pausing his movement and avoiding danger until the coast was clear. Think of the pause like the Tanooki Suit power-up. This brief statue moment allows us to step back, observe our emotions, and choose a thoughtful, intentional response. This pause can be the difference between a reactive, unhelpful response and one that is measured and constructive.

Research on mindfulness also supports the effectiveness of the pause. Mindfulness studies have shown that even brief pauses can enhance emotional regulation, reduce stress, and improve decision-making. By introducing small moments of reflection, individuals and teams can develop greater emotional intelligence, responding to challenges with composure rather than reactivity.



How to Practice the Pause:

1. **Recognize the Trigger:** Pay attention to moments when emotions begin to rise (stress, frustration, or even excitement).
2. **Pause:** Take a deep breath, close your eyes for a moment, or count to three. Create physical and mental space between the trigger and your reaction.
3. **Reflect:** Ask yourself: What is this emotion telling me? How can I respond in a way that aligns with my goals or values?
4. **Choose Your Response:** Once the pause has given you space, choose a response that is thoughtful and intentional, rather than automatic.

Team Tip: For teams, this practice can be woven into meetings or collaborative projects, where individuals take brief pauses to reset and refocus, ensuring the group responds with emotional intelligence rather than reactivity.

3. GRATITUDE AS A PRACTICE

Practicing gratitude is simply intentionally feeling grateful and appreciative for the positive things we have in life. A gratitude intervention requires one to regularly engage in a gratefulness activity or exercise to cultivate the sense of gratefulness and savor appreciation. Some people are more grateful naturally (this is called trait gratitude), but those of us who are more ungrateful by nature can practice an appreciation mindset and strengthen those mental pathways. It's just like building muscle memory through physical exercise, but easier.

Researchers are enthusiastic about gratitude interventions because they are linked to positive outcomes and fairly easy to implement. People who practice gratitude can improve their psychological well-being and happiness, physical and mental health, and sleep quality.

Gratitude interventions are straight-forward, quick, and easy exercises. Perfect power ups!

At work, they enjoy better job satisfaction and job performance and enhanced organizational commitment.

There are several ways a grateful mindset can lead to these positive outcomes. First, gratefulness counteracts our hedonic adaptation, or our tendency to stop noticing pleasant (hedonic) events in our lives. By building a grateful mindset, we become more attentive to little, everyday things to be grateful for, and we are better able to recall and express gratefulness for things in our past. Additionally, the grateful mindset makes us more likely to interpret ambiguous events through the lens of gratitude. All these together make a grateful person's baseline experience more positive leading to those upward spirals.

More recent research has shown that gratitude practices can lead to positive social and relationship outcomes too. In studies of teams, gratitude programs improved collaboration, cohesion, and creativity. Gratitude can even operate at an organizational level through a culture of collective gratitude. When employees share a gratitude mindset, it becomes a natural part of how they operate and interact. It can also be contagious. Gratefulness is the cold we want to spread throughout our work environments.

At the interpersonal level, gratitude works through reciprocity, bonding, and contagion. When one employee expresses gratitude, it shows others how their helpfulness has been noticed and appreciated, and this encourages helpfulness and generosity in return because people naturally want to reciprocate.

Gratitude also helps us find new alliances or friendships, reminds us of the value of the positive relationships that already exist, and strengthens social bonds. One minute you're expressing a heartfelt "thank you" and the next you're being invited to lunch.

Gratefulness sounds great, right? But is it difficult? Not at all! Gratitude interventions are straight-forward, quick, and easy exercises that can be completed individually or in a group. Perfect power ups! The important thing is frequency and repetition. No matter how small the exercise is, it takes some time to make gratitude a habit of the mind.

How to Practice Gratitude:

1. **Make a list:** Make a list of things you are grateful for. The list can be general (i.e. list five things I'm grateful for today) or specific (i.e. list five things I'm grateful for about my team, boss, or coworker).
2. **Keep a Gratitude Journal:** Turn your list from step one into a daily or weekly journaling activity to be consistent with the practice.
3. **Gratefulness Round Table:** Go around the meeting or dinner table and have everyone express appreciation for something or someone.
4. **Write a letter:** Reflect on why you are grateful to someone and write it down in a letter. You may want to send it to them, but you don't have to.
5. **Pause for gratitude:** In a moment of frustration, take a breath and remind yourself of the good aspects of the situation or person that is currently annoying you.

Team Tip: Practicing gratitude as a team, either publicly through gratitude round tables or by designating times to privately reflect and appreciate, can improve team cohesion and lead to a culture of gratefulness, helpfulness, and sharing.

4. START WITH WHY

Transparency in decision-making is one of the key factors that builds trust and fosters engagement within organizations. One powerful way to achieve greater transparency and clarity is by starting with *why*, a concept popularized by [Simon Sinek](#). By clearly articulating the purpose and reasons behind decisions, leaders can ensure that team members understand not only what decisions are made but why they are made. [Research](#) shows that starting with *why* fosters a transparent environment and promotes buy-in from team members. This can reduce resistance to new ideas. When decision-makers clearly explain their reasoning, it increases perceived fairness and legitimacy, thereby [reducing skepticism about the process](#).

At the organizational level, when values, underlying motives, and goals are communicated to employees at all levels they create a sense of shared understanding and alignment internally. [Research](#) indicates that organizational responses to transparency can enhance employee satisfaction and commitment. Often larger organizational goals can feel disconnected to individual tasks and responsibilities.



By clearly articulating the purpose behind tasks and decisions, leaders provide their teams with a "boost" that improves clarity, increases motivation, and helps everyone feel like part of the bigger picture. This approach nurtures a culture of openness, fostering a positive feedback loop where increased transparency reinforces engagement, and engagement further bolsters transparency.

How to Start with Why:

1. **Communicate the purpose behind decisions:** In meetings and communications, take time to explain the *why* behind decisions, whether they relate to strategic goals, team initiatives, or individual tasks.
2. **Align team actions with organizational values:** Make sure team members understand how their contributions align with the organizational mission.
3. **Provide clarity through consistent messaging:** Regularly communicate the vision and purpose of the organization, especially when implementing changes or making key decisions.
4. **Encourage open dialogue:** Foster an environment where team members feel comfortable asking questions and offering feedback on the decision-making process. This openness helps clarify any confusion and ensures everyone is on the same page.

Team Tip: Ask the team for feedback or input on the *why* and decision-making criteria. This not only builds trust but also opens the conversation for any concerns or alternative perspectives that could be considered.



5. MINDING THE MAGIC RATIO

Team dynamics and work relationships can often feel transactional where we are too focused on getting things done through others without considering the relationship that supports the exchange. A micro-intervention that helps us sustain connection to our peers is the “magic ratio”. The “magic ratio” is the ratio of positive to negative social interactions between two people or in a group. A positive social interaction involves warmth and regard for your colleague, things like praise, appreciation, recognition, support, empowerment and connection. A negative social interaction might be a command, demand, criticism, or other transactional experience that lacks consideration of the human side of the relationship. Whether we admit it or not, the workplace is full of emotions and relationships just like all other parts of our lives. For humans to thrive in an environment there must be positive interaction above and beyond just getting the work done and doing it right. This is where the magic ratio comes in.

The magic ratio is sometimes called the PN Ratio (Positive-to-Negative Ratio) because it's always mathematically shown as positives over negatives. For example, five positive interactions for every one negative interaction would be a 5 to 1 PN Ratio. Interest in the PN Ratio began in the 1970's through the observation that there tended to be more negative than positive interactions between teachers and elementary school students and that it only got worse in middle school and high school. New training asked teachers to increase their ratio of positive to negative interactions with students. Early studies showed that increasing positive interactions, such as giving more praise, did encourage more appropriate student behavior and did so better than ignoring inappropriate behavior, establishing rules, or reprimanding inappropriate behavior.

Leadership research has always supported the notion that positive interactions matter.

Overall, there is quite a bit of support for the idea that increasing positive interactions so that they outweigh the negative ones can support better quality relationships as well as enhance individual outcomes. Studies have looked at ratios as high as eight positives to one negative interaction and as low as one to one, but no one ratio has been established to work in all situations. It seems the magic is in minding the ratio. The goal is to pay attention to how much interaction is positive and how much is negative to make sure they are at least even or that the positive outweighs the negative.

The question is, does this work at work? Leadership research has always supported the notion that positive interactions matter. The most effective managers are ones who plan and organize the work to meet organizational goals but also build relationships with employees to support, recognize, and empower them. However, many leaders do not build relationships evenly across their team. They have a high-quality relationship and positive interactions with some employees (their ingroup) and lower-quality, task-oriented interactions with others (the outgroup). To make sure all employees are offered positive interactions, leaders need to learn to spot their own biases (e.g. similar-to-me bias) and make an effort to fairly and consistently support all employees with positive interactions.

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Leaders and colleagues can increase their PN Ratio at work by giving more positive feedback and recognition. This lets employees know when their work is on track, reinforces good work habits, and recognizes them for their contributions. Surprisingly the “feedback sandwich”, where you layer a negative feedback message between two positive ones, is not fully supported by research. When a quick correction is needed, simply deliver the negative feedback by itself and do not confuse the situation with mixed messaging. Overall, employees do their best work when they have both positive and negative (corrective) feedback that is frequent, specific, and given by a trusted source. Feedback and recognition should also be fair and appropriate for the cultural context, especially in the international business environment.

How to Practice Minding the Ratio at Work:

1. **Increase positive interactions:** Add more genuine praise, appreciation, recognition, support and caring into interactions.
2. **Pay attention to the negative interactions:** Be mindful of the purely transactional interactions you have with colleagues and employees.
3. **Distribute feedback and recognition fairly across your team:** While not all team members perform equally, everyone can benefit from feedback and support.

Team Tip: Make sure everyone on the team is getting the support they need. Create a culture of feedback giving and feedback seeking by integrating these into one-on-one and team meetings.

The true power of micro-interventions lies in their ability to help us navigate challenges by elevating our day-to-day experience.

Micro-interventions are the power-ups of the workplace, offering small but mighty boosts that can elevate performance and spark success. What makes micro-interventions so powerful is their ability to drive team success in a way that feels seamless and sustainable. In a world where team dynamics, shifting priorities, and mounting pressures are constant, these quick actions can help recalibrate a team's direction, build engagement, and restore a sense of purpose, all without requiring major overhauls. By embracing these quick, intentional practices, organizations can create an ongoing momentum that fuels higher performance, deeper engagement

and more fulfilling work. Ultimately, the true power of micro-interventions lies in their ability to help us navigate challenges by elevating our day-to-day experience. Small steps, big impact, what power-up will you use first?



MEET THE AUTHORS

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Bethany is an HR educator passionate about making workplaces better for all employees.

Bethany has more than 15 years of experience in HR and education. She began her career working in learning & development and HR in the restaurant and retail industries. She has experience in both small, privately-owned businesses and large, Fortune 500 organizations. Bethany holds a BA in Psychology, MA in Organizational Management, the SHRM-SCP certification, and is a Certified Genos International Emotional Intelligence Practitioner. Bethany has spoken at a variety of conferences throughout the country and leads corporate training on topics including emotional intelligence, leadership, and strategic HR.



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Heather supports better ideas and informed decisions through evidence-based HR. She holds a Ph.D. in Organizational Behavior, an MS in Industrial Organizational Psychology, and BS in Public Health Education. Heather's career has broadly focused on employee experiences and the organizational contexts that shape those experiences, particularly employee wellness and work-family integration. Her research on work-family decision-making and boundary management is published in the *Journal of Occupational and Organizational Psychology* and *European Journal of Work and Organizational Psychology*. While Heather's expertise is in well-being and work-life balance, she is a work in progress like everyone else. She practices gratitude, basic self-care, and energy-management over the idea of traditional balance.

