

Morale and Motivation

by Bob Whipple, MBA, CPLP

Every manager I have ever met, including myself, would appreciate higher morale and motivation among his or her team. After all, these two attitudes lead directly to productivity and employee satisfaction, which are pivotal in sustaining a healthy business. Many managers have a stated goal to improve morale, motivation, or both. I contend the mindset inherent in setting goals for these items shows a lack of understanding that actually will limit the achievement of both.

The reason is that morale and motivation are not objectives; they are the outcomes of a great or a lousy culture. If you spend your time and energy trying to improve the environment to include higher trust, then higher morale and motivation will happen. If you try to drive morale, it may sound to the employees like the famous saying, "The beatings will continue until morale improves."

I have seen a group of people at work with such low motivation, there seemed to be no way to get any work done. If a manager dared try to speak to a group of employees, they would heckle or just pay no attention. Nothing the leader said or did had much impact on the employees, so in desperation, the manager would stoop to threats. This would elicit a half hearted groan and some compliance for a time, but the quality of product would suffer, and the gains would be only temporary.

I have seen that same group of workers six months down the line after putting in a really good leader. The atmosphere was entirely different. The employees showed by their body language that they were eager to do a great job. If there was a dirty or difficult job and the leader asked for volunteers, half a dozen hands would go up immediately. When they were at work, they resembled the seven dwarfs whistling while they worked rather than slaves in the belly of a ship being forced to row.

How was that one leader able to accomplish such a turn-around in just six months? The leader focused on changing the underlying culture to one of high trust rather than just demanding improvement in the performance indicators. The motivation and morale

improved by orders of magnitude as a result rather than because they were the objective. Let's look at some specific steps this manager took early in her term that turned things around quickly:

Built trust - She immediately let people know she was not there to play games with them. She was serious about making improvements in their existence and had that foremost in her mind. She built a real culture where people felt safe to come to her with any issue and know they would not be insulted or punished.

Improved teamwork - She invested in some teamwork training for the entire group, offsite. These workshops made a big difference in breaking down barriers and teaching people how to get along better in the pressure cooker of normal organizational life.

Empowered others - She made sure the expectations of all workers were known to them but did not micromanage the process. She let people figure out how to accomplish tasks and got rid of several arcane and restrictive rules that were holding people back from giving their maximum discretionary effort.

Reinforced progress - The atmosphere became lighter and more fun for the workers as they started to feel more successful and really enjoyed the creative reinforcement activities set up by their leader. She let the workers plan their own celebrations within some reasonable guidelines and participated in the activities herself.

Promoted the good work - the manager held a series of meetings with higher management to showcase the progress in an improved culture. The workers were involved in planning and conducting these meetings, so they got the benefit of the praise directly from top management.

Set tough goals - It is interesting that the manager did not set weak or easy goals. Instead, she set aggressive stretch goals and explained her faith that the team was capable of achieving them. At first, people seemed to gulp at the enormity of her challenges, but that soon gave way to elation as several milestones were reached.

Support - The manager supported people when they had personal needs, and made sure the organization received the funding needed to buy better equipment and tools.

Firm but fair - The manager was consistent in her application of discipline. People respected her for not playing favorites and for making some tough choices that may have been unpopular at the moment but were right in the long run. Her strength was evident in decisions every day, so people grew in their respect for her.

This manager turned a near-hopeless workforce into a cracker-jack team of highly motivated individuals in six months. Morale was incredibly high. Even though improving morale was not her objective, it was the outcome of her actions to improve the culture.

If you want to be one of the elite leaders of our time, regardless of the hand you have been dealt, work on the culture of your organization rather than driving a program to improve morale and motivation. Develop trust and treat people the right way, and you will see a remarkable transformation in an amazingly short period of time.



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